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In Elizabeth, Irrational is raising the bar for characterisation in videogames. On p76, creative director Ken Levine explains what her unique behaviours bring to one of the biggest titles of 2012

HYPE
MASS EFFECT 3
THE SECRET WORLD
ASURA'S WRATH
PLANETSIDE 2
SYNDICATE

SHE'S THE ONE

BIOSHOCK INFINITE
AND THE BIRTH OF A NEW GAMING ICON

GTAIII

TEN YEARS ON, ROCKSTAR TELLS THE INSIDE STORY
PLUS: GTAV REVEALED

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CHRISTMAS 2011

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ASSASSIN'S CREED REVELATIONS
PAYDAY: THE HEIST
RAYMAN ORIGINS

The difficult journey across gaming's gender divide



If you've played *Uncharted 3*, you've no doubt compared it to Nathan Drake's previous adventures. With series, that's what we do, whether it's measuring Jedi against Empire or Weekend At Bernie's II to the original comedy epic about a pair of young men and their corpse-related scrapes. Naughty Dog's new game stands up to its predecessor on many counts – and exceeds it in others – but in pushing Drake's love interests to the background it feels like it drops the ball. *Uncharted 2* didn't invent the concept of a love triangle in a videogame, but the fidelity of its characters, and the quality of the performances behind them, gave certain sequences a helping of crackle and fizz previously unseen in this context. It feels like the Drake/Sullivan origin element of the third game is intended to provide an emotional backbone, but it comes off as slight in comparison.

Uncharted 3 may retain the female characters of the second game, but Naughty Dog appears to have run out of things to do with them. It's illustrative of videogames as a whole. We're still waiting to see how the latest reinvention of Lara Croft pans out, but even if 2012's *Tomb Raider* is a hit, it's unlikely to be a catalyst, leading to a run of female-centred games storming the charts. It didn't happen the first time around, after all.

All of which makes the existence of *BioShock Infinite*'s Elizabeth all the more invigorating. Not because she's capable of outrunning rolling boulders or because she's a convincingly rendered love interest, but because she's at the fore of the game's fiction, and without her in place the moment-to-moment experience would be entirely different. Developer Irrational Games is investing an extraordinary amount of time and effort in the appearance, actions and dialogue of this non-player character – and within the framework of what is fundamentally an FPS, the most masculine of all game genres. Naturally, though, she's only part of the *BioShock Infinite* story. Our deeper dig into the game begins on p76.



games

Hype

46

Play

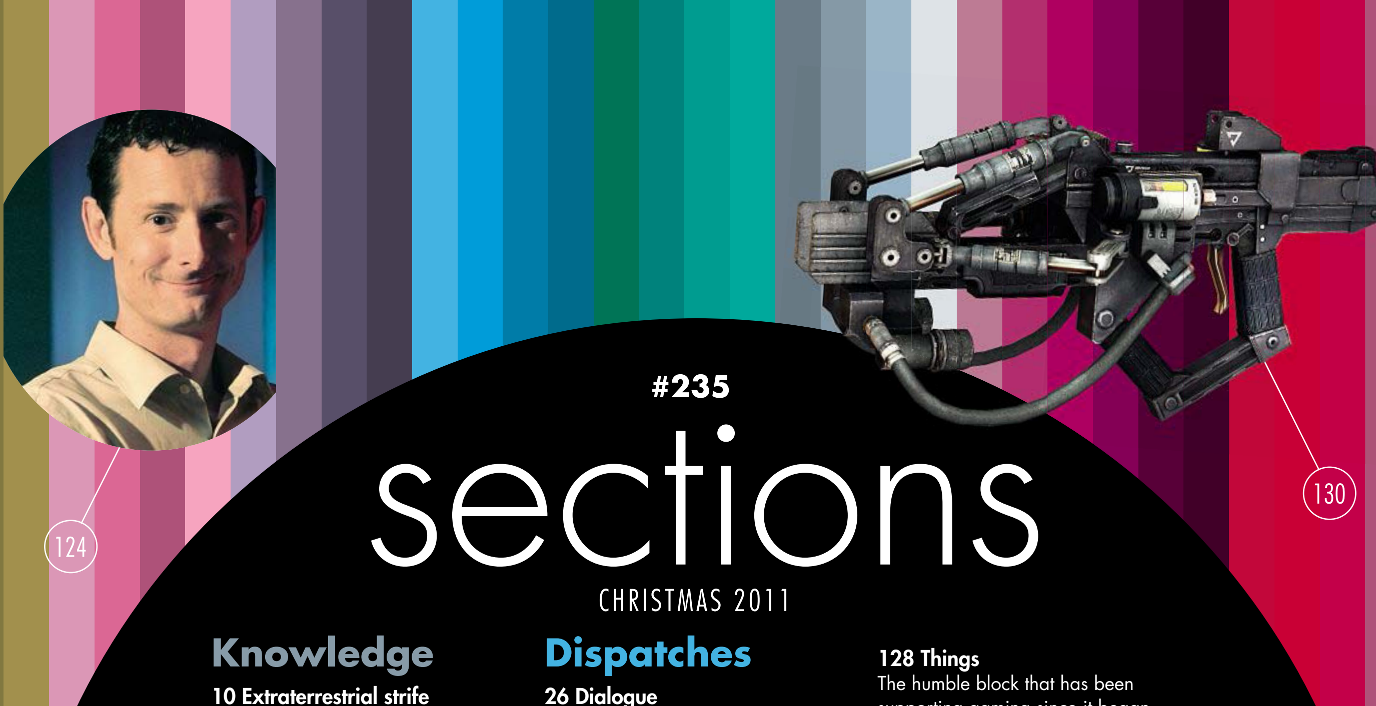
104







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sections

CHRISTMAS 2011









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THANKS TO

Lewis Digby, Joe Fielder, Tim Ponting, and everyone who voted for us in the GMAs

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Printed in the UK by William Gibbons. Covers printed by Midway Colour Print. Distributed in the UK by Seymour Distribution Ltd, 2 East Poultry Avenue, London, EC1A 9PT (+44 (0)20 7429 4000)

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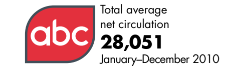


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GAMING WORLD INSIGHT, INTERROGATION AND INFORMATION



WLEDGE

If infinite space means infinite profit, then CCP Games, developer of *Eve Online* (1), should have been raking it in. Instead, it's faced a user uprising that threatened the carefully built society and economy of the game. On p10, it tells its side of the story. Meanwhile Frontier's David Braben (2) addresses Microsoft's Kinect push, explaining on p12 why he thinks it could benefit the core gaming sector. And so to a perennial question: are games art? Yes, says Dutch art dealer Cook & Becker (3), which will sell you gaming-inspired prints to utterly shame your collection of Master Chief posters. We talk to its founder, who's aiming his company's wares at the high-end art market, on p14. Charity SpecialEffect (4) is focused on neglected markets, too, as it helps gamers with disabilities to play more easily. Its director tells us how on p16. Amanita Design, the Czech studio noted for its *Samorost* and *Machinarium* point-and-click adventures, has a new game in the works, *Botanicula* (5), which we showcase on p18. Among p20's Soundbytes, Sony is revealed as the crazy uncle of game publishing, while the political sympathies of PopCap's chief game designer are pitched somewhere to the left of Ken Livingstone's. Finally, in My Favourite Game, TV presenter, writer and comedian Alex Zane (6) expounds on his love for Amiga-age classics such as *Civilization*, *Monkey Island* and *Speedball 2*.



www.bit.ly/lM3xIa
Up-to-the-minute game news and views

Trouble in paradise

What happens when your MMOG's most loyal customers revolt, and take their spaceships with them?

From the Arab Spring to the ongoing Occupy Wall Street movement, this has been a year of citizen unrest. It's even happened, albeit on a smaller scale, in *Eve Online*. June's *Incarna* expansion failed to deliver on its promises of new content and launched with a virtual item store featuring a $70 monocle: a leaked internal memo revealed developer CCP Games was mulling over going a step further by selling gameplay advantages through microtransactions. There were in-game protests, thousands threatened to cancel their subscriptions, and the chairman of the player-elected Council Of Stellar Management (CSM) accused CCP of being "hell-bent on running *Eve Online* into the ground". Strong words from a man backed by legions of Dreadnoughts and Titans.

In October, a humbled CEO Hilmar Petursson took the blame, admitting neglecting the eight-year-old MMOG as he eyed growth elsewhere. Since then, 20 per cent of CCP staff has been laid off, with the company refocusing and promising never to repeat its mistakes. What went wrong?

"I think it came in a hundred different meetings over a long period of time where we continued to try to accomplish too many things at once," says **Ned Coker**, CCP's head of PR and social media. The studio was working on expanding the *Eve* universe with *Dust 514* (see **E**209), a multiplatform MMOFPS where events in-game affect *Eve*, and vice versa. Then there was the vampire MMOG *World Of Darkness* based on Vampire: The Masquerade. There was a growing feeling that CCP was happy to rake in subscriber cash and use it to fund new projects rather than reinvest it in *Eve*. The botched release of *Incarna* was the tipping point.

There was a feeling that CCP was happy to rake in subscriber cash and use it to fund new projects

With the community up in arms, *Eve* summoned the CSM to its Reykjavik headquarters for an emergency meeting. "The atmosphere was pretty tense," Coker says. "They had very clear mandates from their constituents, which mirrored a lot of their own concerns. It's a testament to the work both they and previous CSMs had done over the years that the summit went as well as it did. The CSM stuck to their guns and did the players proud." An uneasy peace was reached.

It didn't last. Before long CSM chairman Alexander 'The Mittani' Gianturco had slammed CCP's "folly and neglect" in an impassioned, thousand-word online diatribe. Subscriber numbers tailed off, though *Eve* has maintained the yearly growth it has enjoyed since its inception in 2003: its userbase is bigger than the country in which it is developed. "We've slowed a bit since the summer," Coker admits, "[but] I wouldn't say losing subscribers was the worst part: in pursuit of our long-term goals, we started to see people who love *Eve* as much as we do become disheartened. To see people passionately plead with us to change direction, or simply give up on *Eve*… that was the worst part."

It's a tired meme, but *Eve Online* is serious business. Literally. Its in-game economy is worth tens of millions per year. In first giving players immense freedom then, through the CSM, significant power in a democratic society, CCP has created something unprecedented – no mere MMOG or social network, but a society. Its implications for the wider industry are enormous: its missteps in virtual item sales, community management, and running a game as a service will make stark reading for traditional publishers and developers who are presently trying to adapt to new business models.

It's a case study in how not to do it, a cautionary tale that CCP could have done with itself. "I wish there was a manual," Coker says. "It would have saved us a lot of sleepless nights, intense arguments and tough decisions. [Yet] we are glad there weren't preset best practices as I don't think anyone could abide a cookie-cutter mould. Going back in time, I think you'd be hard pressed to find Hilmar or any CCP employee wishing we hadn't spent more time communicating more often, and more openly, with our players."

World Of Darkness has suffered a staffing cut as a result of the studio's new focus on *Eve*. The rebuilding effort begins with an expansion this winter – "our first step back to the *Eve* and CCP of old," Coker says – but more importantly CCP now appreciates just how distinctive, how precious, its creation is. "There are so many real-world parallels with social systems in *Eve* that it boggles the mind," Coker says. "*Eve* is a true virtual society. It's an amazing, amazing game." ■

MEA CULPA

Here's an extract from CEO **Hilmar Petursson**'s open letter to the *Eve* community, posted on October 5: "The estrangement from CCP that many of you have been feeling of late is my fault, and for that I am truly sorry. My zeal for pushing *Eve* to her true potential made me lose sight of doing the simple things right. I was impatient when I should have been cautious, defiant when I should have been conciliatory, and arrogant when I should have been humble. You have spoken, loudly and clearly, with your words and with your actions. I was wrong, and I admit it."





Forward motion

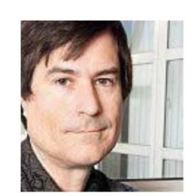
Frontier's David Braben urges hardcore gamers not to fear a Kinect-driven casual takeover

You don't need Raspberry Pi (see p84) to tell you that videogame development's inner child is alive and well at Frontier, home of *Rollercoaster Tycoon 3*, *Kinectimals* and now *Kinect Disneyland Adventures*. But there's always been that shadow stretching all the way back to *Elite* – that naive notion of The Games It Should Be Making. The greater its portfolio becomes, it seems, the harder it is to forget about *The Outsider*.

"It is on hold. That's semi-permanent hold, and it's how you choose to phrase that," states studio founder **David Braben** of what is, still, a very complex situation. Others haven't been nearly so tactful. He doesn't want to talk about the NDA-busting gossip on the Internet, but accepts our invitation to shut down the rumour mill. "Realistically, restarting the game as it was would be hard, but, having said that, I'd like to do something with it in the future. 'To be defined.'"

People dwell upon *The Outsider*, the massively ambitious open-world spy thriller announced in **E**165's cover story, because it promised a break from relentless iteration and cannibalism. In a generation ashamed to confess its spiralling debt to James Cameron, this game spoke of Capricorn One. On paper, it was the thinking person's action game. And in code? We might never know. But we do know this: it has not gone to waste.

Revisit **E**165's story now and you'll read of fur-rendering research and shader stylisation crucial to *Kinectimals* and *KDA*, all within the envelope of *The Outsider*'s development. "And we've used a lot of the knowledge and experience of doing the big, streamed world in *KDA*," Braben adds. "When things don't see the light of day it is very upsetting, and I don't mind saying that. These things happen, though, for many and varied reasons. One of the things we've done since we started is try to plan that each of the games we do have an element in them that'll be useful going forward. You've seen what we've built with *KDA*, but we're building relationships as well."


David Braben founded developer Frontier in Cambridge in 1994

SECOND WAVE
"The first thing we had to have was head tracking, which was magical," says Braben of Frontier's ongoing experience with Kinect. "But a lot of the first-generation Kinect games were all slightly different in the ways they went about it. Now they've homed in on what works well and what doesn't. None of us got open navigation working well at all in the first generation. The social aspects, being able to include people who can't otherwise play. We've learned in a lot of dimensions."

Without the *Outsider* technology running beneath an improved suite of editors, he explains, the resting animation of a *Kinectimals* tiger would probably not involve about 80 animations elegantly spun together. "You need a quite sophisticated set of technologies to make it happen, and all those things are quite a step back from the game. They enable it, but aren't unique to it."

> "Kinect is putting more consoles into living rooms, on which the core gamer games can be played"

There is another shadow involved in making games for Kinect, of course: that of the hardware itself. That, and the rather pungent whiff of shovelware which threatens to stink out a platform with vast untapped potential.

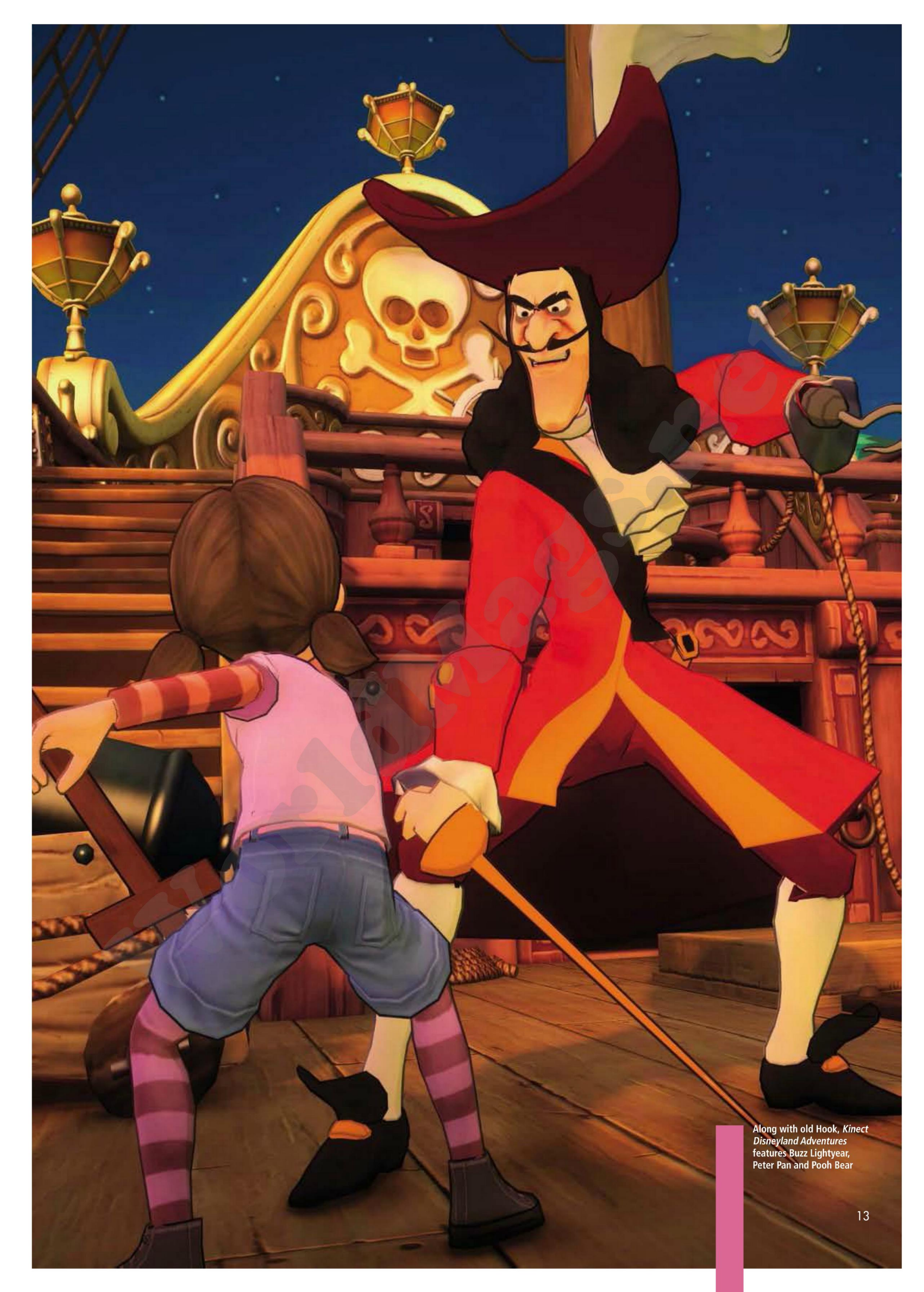
"I think it's actually true of any new platform," Braben says. "If people see an opportunity to get in there with a load of old tosh – that's not implying that any particular game is rubbish, but what worries me is that they're probably done to quite a low budget. With *any* opportunity, people will produce things that are as poor as they can get away with until there's conspicuous failure.

"I get really interested in new interfaces anyway, and you've probably seen a lot of comments I've made about interfaces in the past. Things that, at the time, were often very coolly received and then gradually embraced – and I'm including the mouse and analogue joystick in that. People forget that Kinect still isn't a year old yet [at the time of our interview]. Now, the analogue controller took three years before there was an accepted set of controls; I'm thinking things like *Turok* and *GoldenEye*.

A self-professed 'core' gamer at heart, Braben appreciates the fear of Kinect being a Trojan horse for some kind of casual game 'takeover', but doesn't share it. On the contrary: "I think there are probably more core gamers now than there've ever been. If you look at how widely played *Modern Warfare 2* is, it's certainly not eating into that genre. If anything, it's putting more consoles into living rooms, on which the core gamer games can be played. If anything, what it's doing is putting more money into the pot that's used to develop new hardware.

"I genuinely think Kinect can be helpful to core games. Just subtle changes where you're still playing with a controller but you can lean, or you've got speech without a headset. All of these things are improvements for the future that haven't particularly been embraced, but they'll come." ■


www.bit.ly/twLEfp
More gaming discussion with David Braben



Along with old Hook, *Kinect Disneyland Adventures* features Buzz Lightyear, Peter Pan and Pooh Bear



www.bit.ly/vKCCbG
More art discussion with Maarten Brands

Maarten Brands (above) trained as a reporter, but his love of art and games led him to co-found Cook & Becker. Main image: 'Frankenstein's Band' by Leeroy Vanilla



SCREEN PRINT

Meet Cook & Becker, the next-gen art dealer

Dutch art dealer **Maarten Brands** doesn't waste time fretting over the question of whether or not games should be deemed art. He and a handful of partners have launched Cook & Becker, a company which specialises in selling museum-grade prints from the entertainment sector – including videogames – via its Web site and Amsterdam gallery.

"Look at the cultural impact of these game designers," Brands says, "and how many people have seen their work and what they're bringing to the world in terms of visual language and design. A promotional image like *GTA*'s 'Lollipop girl' – that's culturally relevant stuff."

Cook & Becker has already produced work for Rockstar, in addition to working with individual artists such as BAFTA winner Victor Antonov (*Half-Life 2*), Keita Takahashi (*Katamari Damacy*) and Jesse van Dijk, whose *Killzone 3* concept art 'Stahl Arms' won an award at the 2011 Into The Pixel competition. The digital nature of game artwork brings its reproduction methodology in line with high-end contemporary photography, and Cook & Becker's prices reflect this fact. "In terms of the production costs and the price point and the limited-run nature of what we do," Brands says, "we're targeting more mature buyers, art collectors, people who want the next thing in contemporary art." ■

Level playing fields

Accessibility charity SpecialEffect explains why it's important to make games available to all



Dr Mick Donegan, director, SpecialEffect

SpecialEffect's 'Gamers For Good' campaign launched in late September and has already inspired cookbooks, gaming marathons and a trek up Ben Nevis. The charity, which helps players with disabilities to enjoy games, has been embraced by the industry and the gaming community alike. Director Dr **Mick Donegan** tells us about the organisation's approach, and what the industry could do differently.

Where does the process of making games more accessible begin?

We respond to enquiries from individuals who would like to play a particular kind of game. That's what guides us. The more people who contact us, the more games we investigate. For example, there was a guy who wanted to play *Football Manager*, *FIFA* and MMOs, but he was finding it difficult. He wanted to use pointer control, so we tried him out with gaze control. Then we started investigating all the games – based on his interests and needs – he could play.

How do you go about recommending a game on the basis of need?

By 'need', we mean whatever motivates someone. I think that's very important. There are a range of reasons why anyone plays games – enjoyment, competition, socialisation – but there are some additional needs. In our case, there are therapeutic benefits for some of the people that we work with. Young people, for example, who have had some kind of head injury and as a result find it difficult to move a part of their body. We're collaborating with the Children's Trust in Tadworth to work with individuals as a way of encouraging them to regain those skills. What we're learning already is that children use these games for therapeutic benefits far longer than if they were doing exercises.

Some of the people we work with have communication difficulties – they find it difficult to speak or express themselves due to a physical disability. They have a communication aid that they need to operate in order to speak with other people. What often happens with these communication aids is that they don't get used – they end up getting left in cupboards. One of the reasons for that is that they don't have the same opportunities for communication as everyone else. They don't have enough fun shared experiences. What better way of motivating people to communicate with each other than playing games?

"Children use games for therapeutic benefits far longer than if they were doing exercises"

Do you ever come up against resistance when trying to encourage people to play games?

There are perceptions on the side of people with disabilities and the people supporting them that games aren't good for you. What we're saying is that they are, and that's why case studies are so important – to actually show the benefits to particular individuals and post it on the Web site for people all over the world.

We're persuading the games industry on the one hand that it would take very little tweaking to change games to make them more accessible to people with disabilities, and we're telling people with disabilities that they can, with a little bit of help, play games. We're in the middle. The glue.

Should game design be formalised with regard to accessibility?

You can set certain general guidelines, but I feel that it's very difficult to legislate games. We are here to collaborate with games developers because you need a certain level of experience of working with a wide range of people. Other developers will then be able to actually see the potential benefits – the ways in which games can take more needs into account.

A simple example: on the Kinect, there's a game where you're plugging holes with your hands and your feet. For the people we've worked with, that's a really difficult game to play. If, at the start, there was an option to use only the top half of your body, all of a sudden many people in a wheelchair would be able to play it. It would take very little time, and it's such an obvious thing. The Kinect is great as a device – it's absolutely amazing – but it's what the developers do with it that excludes or includes people.

Motion controls are called 'accessible' – does the word need reclaiming?

There's this idea that with the Kinect, we've gotten rid of the need to be able to use a joypad – and that this lets everyone into games. Unfortunately, it only admits people who are physically able, and quick, and accurate in their movement. With joypad-based games, in many cases, we can provide an alternative – with movement-based games, we can't. There isn't an alternative to movement, so in some ways it's actually less accessible. We need to make that loud and clear. ■



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SpecialEffect's home page



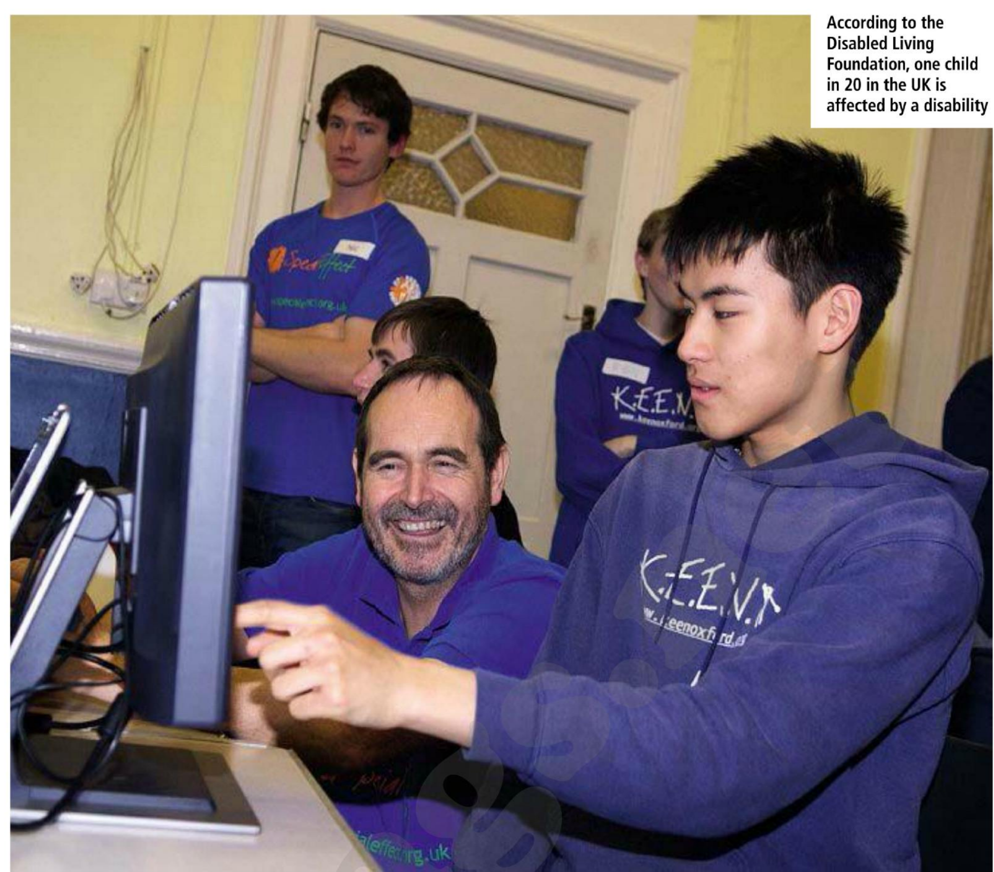


Eye-tracking equipment known as 'gaze control' allows gamers like Alex to move a pointer on the screen, which can lead to complete game control



Fifty per cent of families with disabled children regarded their ability to enjoy leisure together unsatisfactory according to a 2009 report by disability charity Contact A Family. Donegan believes that it is the abstract nature of games that allows them to fill the need for shared experience

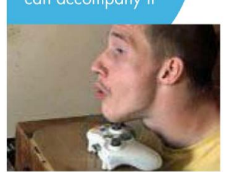
According to the Disabled Living Foundation, one child in 20 in the UK is affected by a disability





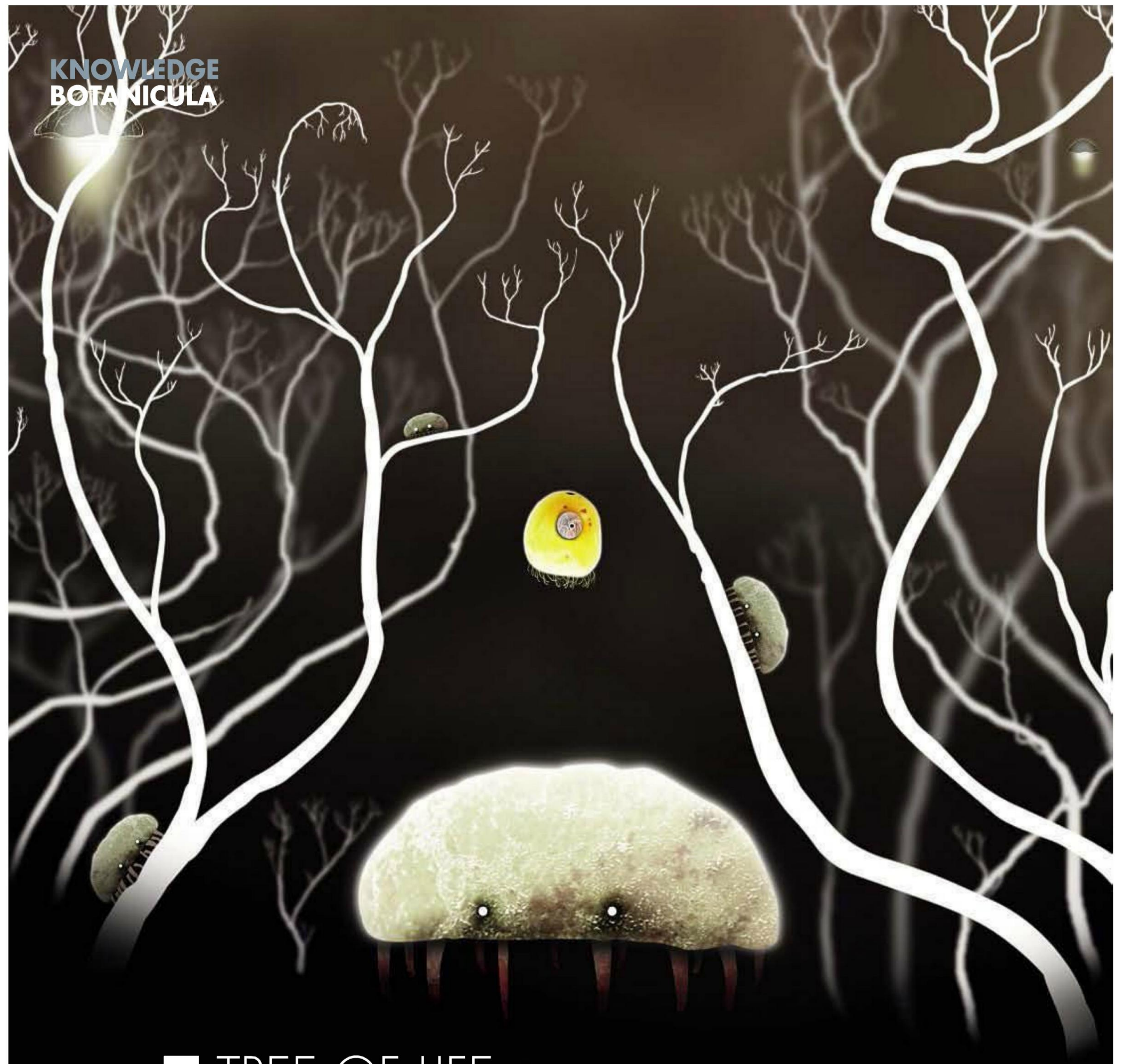
CONTROL POINTS

Hands-free gaming – and the issues that can accompany it



Gareth (above) enjoys racing games and firstperson shooters. He plays using a modified 360 controller which he uses with his chin. SpecialEffect loaned him the equipment he needed and supported him while he raised the money to purchase his own. The absence of remappable controls causes problems, and he has a simple request for RPG makers: "Developers continue to create combat systems where your ability to move back and forth determines how well you do. Instead, developers should allow your character to automatically rotate in whatever direction their target is."





TREE OF LIFE

The surreal new game concept from the Czech studio behind Samorost

Formed by animation graduate **Jakub Dvorsky**, tiny Czech studio Amanita Design delights in the visual pleasure that traditional 2D animated characters and backgrounds provide. As Dvorsky tells us, its latest project, *Botanicula*, is a point-and-click adventure in which players guide five weird characters in an attempt to save a vast tree and its inhabitants from an invasion.

***Botanicula* is a thesis project by your artist Jaromir Plachy, right?**
Yes. It's interesting because Jarmir is a cartoon maker and animator, and he'd never created or even played games – he only became interested when I grabbed him to do some animation on *Machinarium*. He's following in my footsteps because he's studying at the academy of art in Prague, as I did, in the department of animated film. Everyone usually makes short animated movies as their thesis work – I was the first to break this tradition and create a game. Jarmir is doing the same thing, but with a much larger project!

Does a traditional kind of logic exist throughout the game?
Botanicula is based around funny situations and animations, and exploring the vast world of this strange tree. You meet many creatures; there are a huge number of animations. And, yes, there is a logic to it even if it's a little surreal – there are bad guys, there are good guys, there are creatures living neutrally on the tree. It's a functional ecosystem.

You're also interested in iPad as a gaming platform, both for *Samorost* and *Botanicula*. Is there something about the physical form of the tablet that you like?
Yes, it's very natural to control a game with your fingers – and also you can play whenever and wherever you want – on the train, on the couch, in bed. I use mine every morning before I get up and in the evening before I go to sleep. It's really like a book. I was reading all the time when I was growing up, and that influenced me a lot. It's a very different experience than sitting by a computer, which feels more like work. The iPad screen is great too – I love it, it's so colourful. Most people have crappy cheap monitors with their PCs – when I visit friends I'm often disappointed at how bad my games look on their screens! ■



12
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Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls

"Microsoft is very reliable, like your dad.

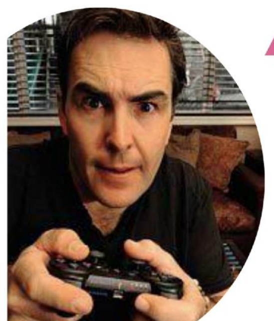


Sony lets you make your own mistakes, like a crazy uncle."

Hello Games MD **Sean Murray**, revealing as much about his own family as platform holders

"I threatened to expose Jason Kapalka for the pinko Commie that I know he is if he didn't approve my right-wing Cold War-era propaganda machine."

PopCap's **Josh Langley** on the genesis of *Heavy Weapon*



"'Just a video game' is becoming a thing of the past. **There's no such thing."**

Voice of Nathan Drake **Nolan North** leads the cheering

"Driving discs in a big van all over the world is really inefficient."

Dino Patti, CEO of *Limbo* dev Playdead, on why game retail is "broken"

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Dirty Drivin'
Manufacturer Specular Interactive

If Specular Interactive's *H2Overdrive* was a spiritual successor to *Hydro Thunder*, then consider *Dirty Drivin'* a land-based extension of that same family tree. As with *H2Overdrive*, *Dirty Drivin'* links up to eight cabinets in a cutthroat race to the finish. The seven scenarios split over 14 tracks are vast, but the finely detailed vistas give you enough room to ram, smash and slam 20 AI opponents out of your way. Weapons turn each race into chaos, and a lever in the player's cockpit allows you to unleash hell on the opposition. Though epic in scale and heavy on spectacle, there's an intricacy to tracks (from hidden ramps to secret shortcuts) that adds variety to repeated laps. The purpose of each race is singular, though: come first by any means necessary. Points are awarded for wiping out other racers, unlocking all manner of nastiness from mines to guns.

A 42-inch screen brings out the best of Specular's game engine, and fits with the bigger-is-better trend for cabinet design. The cockpit also incorporates a keypad that allows dedicated racers to store and return to their favourite, upgraded vehicles, adding a personal touch to your trip through the mud.





My favourite game
Alex Zane

The presenter of movie show Guest List tells us about his penchant for a riveting story

Alex Zane's passion for movies might be a prominent part of his CV, what with his Sky Movies show Guest List and position as film critic for The Sun, but it's videogames that kindled his love of an epic yarn. Wii Fit board – "there's no more tragic image" – cast aside in favour of a comfy chair and pad, we settle down to discuss the Amiga golden age.

IN ZANE
As well as his movie review and interviewing duties, Zane is an active stand-up comic, while his TV writing credits include The 11 O'Clock Show and Smack The Pony. He's also hosted a number of radio programmes, including the XFM Breakfast Show, and writes and presents comedy clip show Rude Tube.

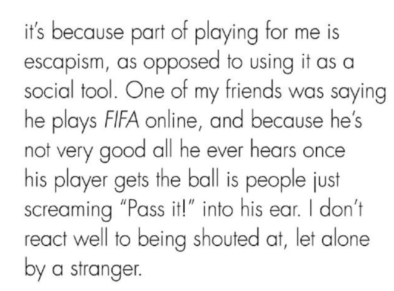
What's your earliest gaming memory?
My uncle was quite into computers and he programmed a game of hangman on a ZX Spectrum. I remember playing it when I was five or six years old, just watching this little stickman gain a limb every time you got a letter wrong. But my first personal experience of going, "Right, this is gaming" was when I got an Acorn Electron. It came with a handful of games – one of them was *Sphinx Adventure*. It was all text-based, and I think you could type in 'yes', 'no' and which direction you wanted to go. I didn't get very far – the only thing I remember is that no matter what I did, text always came up saying: 'A dwarf has killed you with an axe'.



Are you a big adventure gamer?
I am, yeah. I like a good story. I think it probably comes from my love of film. And I love scale; an epic world that you become immersed in. I had an Amiga 500, and that was my golden era of gaming. Playing *Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge* – that was just a phenomenon for me. I always sought out games like that. I'm fully aware there are gaming worlds out there such as Xbox Live, but I just don't do them – I game in a very solitary fashion. I think it's because part of playing for me is escapism, as opposed to using it as a social tool. One of my friends was saying he plays *FIFA* online, and because he's not very good all he ever hears once his player gets the ball is people just screaming "Pass it!" into his ear. I don't react well to being shouted at, let alone by a stranger.



Do you tend to do most of your gaming at home?
When I'm not actually working I'm doing a lot of writing – movie reviews, preparing interviews for my Sky show or writing the Rude Tube script. All of that takes place in one room where my computer is, and at the far end of my flat is the room with the gaming equipment. I'm so easily distracted that if I had something on my computer… I bought *Civilization* for it, and I lost days that I needed. Now I actually have to physically stand up and walk to the other end of the flat to sit down and game. This is probably something for a therapist, but I had the old chair I used to game in at my mum's house shipped down to London, so that I can sit in the exact chair that I gamed in from ages six through to 19!

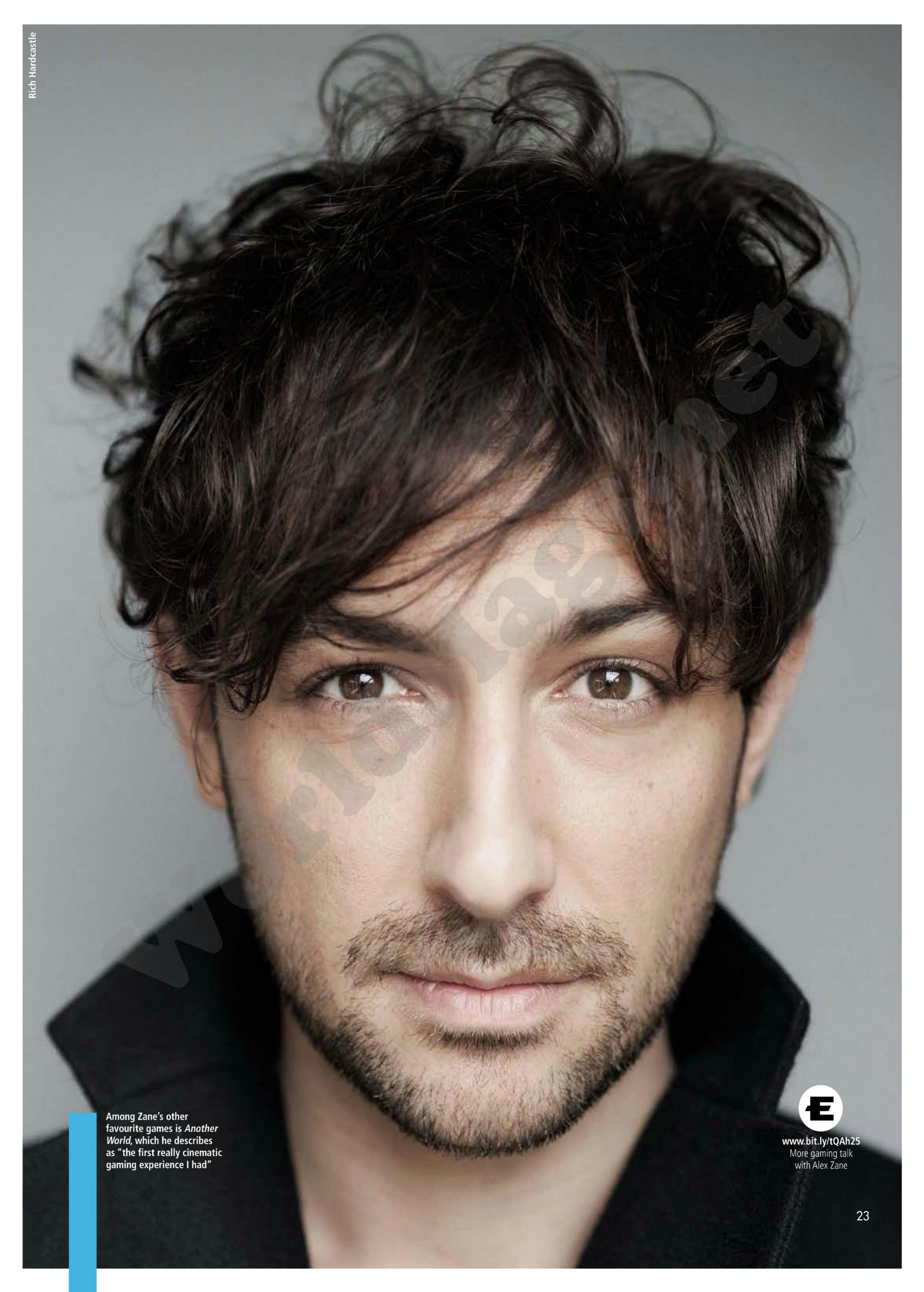


"I actually got into TV because when I was younger I was enamoured with Dominik Diamond on GamesMaster"

Do you think it's possible to have something like Film 2011 or Guest List, but for games?
I actually got into TV because when I was younger I was enamoured with Dominik Diamond on GamesMaster. I used to think he was the coolest guy on TV – I watched GamesMaster religiously. The problem with bringing gaming to TV has nothing to do with the size of the industry now – I think I'd be right in saying that it's the biggest entertainment industry on the planet. But I think the people who make TV have this fear that putting actual gameplay onscreen will be a turn-off for the audience. I think that's the problem it has to get past.

Comedy and games aren't always the most comfortable bedfellows. Are there any games that you've played recently that have made you laugh for the right reasons?
That's a really good question. A funny game? Although I can't remember anything off the top of my head, I recall some of the conversations in *Red Dead Redemption* having some nice, humorous moments in them. It's all down to scripting and voice acting, and I think both of those in the last couple of years have increased in quality tenfold in videogames. Oh, and *Conan*! It was outright, unashamed, unabashed misogyny! It's thoroughly enjoyable [laughs]. So that was quite funny, in a gratuitous way.

Finally, then, which game do you cherish the most?
I don't want to say the obvious ones – *Mario Kart* and *GoldenEye* just *are* the greatest games ever. I'll go for *Speedball 2: Brutal Deluxe*. It's probably the most outright fun I ever had playing games. ■



Among Zane's other favourite games is *Another World*, which he describes as "the first really cinematic gaming experience I had"

www.bit.ly/tQAh25
More gaming talk with Alex Zane

WEB SITE

Play The Past
www.playthepast.org
A collaboratively authored and edited community blog dedicated "to thoughtfully exploring and discussing the intersection of cultural heritage (very broadly defined) and games/ meaningful play (equally broadly defined)", Play The Past has some insightful dissections of current – and past – gaming affairs. There's a lot to get stuck into, whether it's bite-sized art segments that explore the untold, fan-made backstories of games like *Pac-Man* or meatier explorations of the cultural worth and impact of ARGs and even boardgames and collectable card games. The site's contributors are far from hobbyists, made up largely of university professors and professionals bringing experience from fields such as history, anthropology and literature.



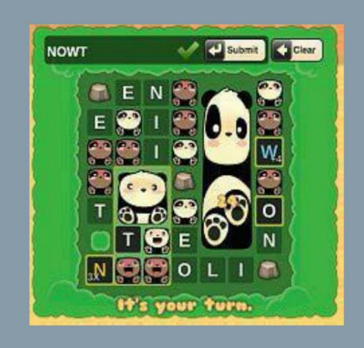


VIDEO

Dark Souls speedrun
www.bit.ly/nAEdVy
Is there anything more soul-crushing than *Dark Souls*' nerve-shredding, teeth-grinding journey down, up and through one of the most expansive and atmospheric gameworlds of recent memory? How about proof of one user's ability to overcome it all in less than 90 minutes? YouTube poster SexyShoiko's seven-part series will astound, inspire and intimidate as each obstacle is overcome and each foe is vanquished in a near-perfect run through one of gaming's most gruelling and thrilling gauntlets.

WEB GAME

Panda Poet
game.pandapoet.com
Having blended match-three puzzling with *Civilization* in the form of the excellent *Triple Town*, Spry Fox has now blended match-three with *Words With Friends* (also apparently known as 'Scrabble'). *Panda Poet*, which like *Triple Town* was originally made for Kindle, has you creating words for points against a single AI or human opponent. When you use a letter it forms a panda square and reveals the letters under adjacent grassed-over squares. Blocks of panda squares combine into large pandas, which contribute to your score if you keep them your colour. Juggling double scores and adding tonnage to your pandas (while trying to avoid leaving opportunities for your opponent to capture them) leads to deliciously anarchic contests. *Words With Friends* has a major challenger.

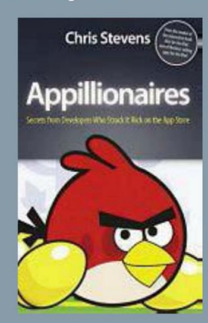


THIS MONTH ON EDGE

A collection of things that tugged at our attention during the production of **E**235

BOOK

Appillionaires: Secrets From Developers Who Struck It Rich On The App Store (Chris Stevens; John Wiley & Sons)
During each Apple keynote, when Steve Jobs arrived at the slide displaying how much Apple had paid out to iOS developers, it was easy to fantasise about stuffing the entire sum into your own pocket. In Appillionaires, author and iOS developer Chris Stevens examines the App Store gold rush and the small-shop developers – such as the Croatian duo behind *Doodle Jump* – who've made millions from reaching critical mass on the store. Stevens examines the cruel unpredictability of the market, and offers lessons from the developers who managed to beat the odds.



continue

Siri
A slickly presented comedy crystal ball

Edge on iOS
You've downloaded the Newsstand app, right?

Good-game season
Our supply of 9s must be just about exhausted

***Skyrim's* bestiary**
Somehow giving new life to tired old dragons

quit

Siri
An easily confused comedy crystal ball

Cheevos
Can we hunt down the gonk who coined this?

Vita game prices
The cost of handheld console performance

Midnight launches
What's that? *Dean Gaffney was there?*

TWEETS

Doom 4 rumor is a bit silly… We're still cranking away on *Doom* & *Rage*… and btw, we're still looking to hire even more talent.
@id_Hooper

Coffee and *League Of Legends* all day, Margaritas and bridge at night. Thank God for hard games and soft drugs.
@flantz

Tonight I was tweeted by someone telling me how much he loves [*Football Manager*]. His next tweet was to a cracker asking when it would be cracked. Sigh.
@milessi

Pandas in *WOW*?! They're nightmare creatures, with black hearts!
@thrmoptc

I'll tell you what a good game is: *Arkham City*. Proper good.
@sdgaffney



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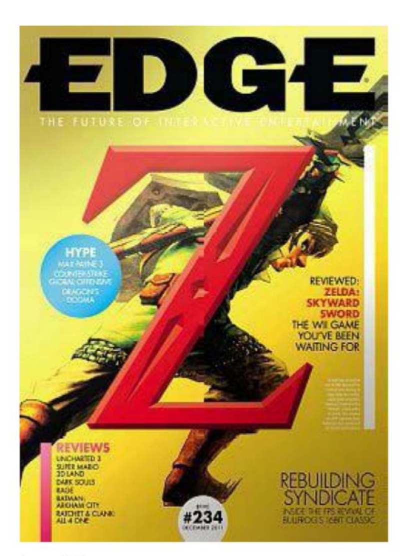

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DISPATCHES CHRISTMAS

Within Dispatches this month, Dialogue sees **Edge** readers taking on the longevity of big titles (and whether *LittleBigPlanet* was right all along), where interactive entertainment stands against films when it comes to character development and plotting, having enough time to play games, and *Human Revolution*'s standing within the RAF. In Perspective, **Steven Poole** asks why aliens look so much like humans, **Leigh Alexander** wants game designers and writers to get along, and **Brian Howe** digs up the Quasipedia entry for a venerable JRPG.



www.next-gen.biz/forum
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers



Issue 234

Dialogue

Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Our letter of the month wins a 3DS

The year of the game

A continuing theme with games seems to be a desire to have the same general social acceptance as the cinema. A couple of years ago it was announced that games were now generating more revenue than Hollywood with much enthusiasm by the trade press, but cash is not the same thing as artistic acceptance. For decades now, the news of a game being turned into a film has been met with excitement, only to have it dashed. The desire to be seen to have the same worthiness as cinema's finest has been elusive, and while there are classic games out there in terms of storytelling and character development, cinema seems to always be one step ahead.

However, maybe 2011 is the year this changed. Comparing the mega-budget games out so far this year (and I know some key titles have yet to be released at the time I am writing) to the mega-budget movies, I think the games win it in terms of intelligent storylines, character development and even script. Thor, Captain America, Cowboys Vs Aliens, Green Lantern and Transformers 3 – surely these are aimed at the same market that bought *Dead Space 2*, *LA Noire*, *Deus Ex* and *Gears Of War 3* – and yet which engage with the consumer more intelligently?

The above list of films is about as risk-averse as you can get, and shows perhaps a creative laziness in the attempt to make a profit. Compare this to the risks involved with *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, which doesn't have exactly great customer recognition. Indeed, what drives you forward in that game is the storyline and Adam Jensen's decisions when the 'right' path isn't always obvious. By comparison, the morality in this year's summer films has been neatly painted in black and white. Even *Gears Of War 3* has moments of poignancy unmatched by the biggest action films of this year, including Transformers 3.

This is the first year when the game industry seems to be consistently ahead of the curve, dishing up more thrills wrapped in originality and intelligence than anything a blockbuster film has. Games do have an advantage; playing a character and controlling them for ten or more hours will create a stronger bond than watching someone else doing everything independently onscreen for two. Also, many of these games are heavily influenced by films, but whereas last year's *Red Dead Redemption* was a sort of greatest hits of the best westerns, and *LA Noire* is in many ways *LA Confidential: The Game*, it seems that while game developers are aiming high with their references, the film studios don't want to create new films of that calibre.

Of course the film industry does make movies specifically to win awards, and those which are aimed at adults rather than teens like The King's Speech or Black Swan. These can be beautifully crafted in ways that games will find hard to emulate, and are where character and script are still the main drivers. The game industry hasn't yet made the leap of blatantly splitting in two, but it just struck me while playing *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* that you can have your cake and eat it too. With a game like that you can have a shootout between cyborgs and five minutes later have discourse on serious subjects like morality or humanity, and this is a trick that Hollywood seems to have lost, at least for the time being.
Jem Duducu

That it's been a poor year for movies and a good one for games certainly helps the argument, and *Human Revolution* has laid down some interesting markers. Of course, we'll recognise real progress when we see the arrival of gaming's Weekend At Bernie's.

The conspiracy is real

It has been some years since I played *Deus Ex*, but returning to it again recently for *Human Revolution* has been an absolute joy. I think that, like many gamers, I take my time with this type of game and thoroughly absorb it, down to reading every piece of literature on offer in the environment. Playing it all again recently and finding concepts based on secret societies, the Bilderberg Group and the Illuminati was for me a sign that the script writers are not only creative, but are well educated in alternative media and are thinking outside the box.

I work closely with the RAF, and I can say that you learn very early on that this type of thing is not to be discussed, as much as I think people would like to. Whether it is the fear of ridicule or the fact that free thinking has no place in such an environment, these topics are a big no-no. I think it is great to see that in this regard, game companies are not bought and paid for like the military seems to be. The only danger is to hide such concepts in fiction, since they may be brushed off as just that. These are important real-world reference points that deserve further research and it is my hope that gamers get out there and take a look.
Tristan May

User-generated augments

In just two months, *Human Revolution* has plummeted to nearly a third of its RRP in many stores. This, despite the fact that the so-called 'limited edition' comes with an online pass to negate the competition from preowned sales. The simple lesson: online passes don't work. However, there is a more promising lesson to be learned here.

Despite being hailed as an excellent (if flawed) successor to the 2000 classic, the fact is that once *HR* is over, it's over. The reason that preowned sales have such a

dramatic impact on the market is not because there is no reason for customers to buy new, it's because they have no reason to hang on to games once they're finished. The solution to the preowned problem isn't to force new customers to pay a premium for content that should be on the disc, it's to make sure existing customers stay satisfied. So how could *HR* have done this? The standard model for the industry at the moment is to try to ape the *COD* model, usually resulting in a tacked-on multiplayer that bears almost no resemblance to the main game. For a game such as *Deus Ex*, with its focus on stealth and augmentations, this simply wouldn't do. As much as many people may hate it, few games can compete with the big-name shooters when it comes to online multiplayer. There is an alternative, and a very simple one: rather than mimic *COD*, mimic *LittleBigPlanet*.

Imagine, after completing the singleplayer game, having successfully crawled, hacked and sniped through the various labyrinthine bases and headquarters littered throughout the campaign, to sit down and design your own. A security camera here, a turret there, a pixel-perfect recreation of the first *Mario Bros* level somewhere else. Once it's made, you post it online alongside countless other creations, all readily available to test your skills against.

If customers value the product more than they value its trade-in value, then the preowned market won't pose a threat to the industry. Companies need to stop focusing on forcing their customers to accept a controversial business plan, and spend more time designing something that won't be headed straight back to the retailer after a couple of days.
Jon Winthrop

A 3DS is on its way. Seeing this fine proposal taken on board? Could take a bit longer.


What would you sacrifice to play *Skyrim* for longer?

Time, gentlemen, please

I really enjoyed your preview of *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* in **E**233. But at the same time I have such an overwhelming feeling of dread. It's not directed at the game, but at the prospect of possibly never getting to play it.

I've been playing games for almost 20 years so I have a pretty substantial collection spanning multiple consoles. Usually I have a vague sense of the ratio between completed and unfinished (or never begun) games, but once I entered my games collection information in an iPhone app (Game Vault) I was taken aback. I thought I was (vaguely) ahead but in fact I have only completed 27 per cent of my library. Worse, that number is dropping because of the games I was planning to buy.

Now I have a little one on the way and my wife has begun to remind me that priorities will have to be rearranged. I know that my life is going to change, but I had convinced myself that there would be time, that I can handle my responsibilities and still put in quality game time. But your coverage of *Skyrim* has shown that I am planning to live a lie, because unless I'm utterly efficient there simply won't be time.

This year alone the number of triple-A games bombarding the retail channel is so immense that I just can't keep up. I now have to pick and choose what games I really want to invest my time in and enjoy. It really gives me a sense of frustration at the futility of my struggle and, let's face it, I can't really complain about this to anyone I know. This has to be the quintessential First World Problem, though I am loath to use the phrase. I have a job to do, a wife to help, social activities to participate in, family to call, and on and on and on.

> The number of triple-A games bombarding the retail channel is so immense that I just can't keep up

Taking all this into account, I've fallen into the Ageing Gamer's Conundrum. I still want to game but I have to maintain some sort of balance in my life. All-nighters are out of the question and my pile of shame puts a damper on acquiring the new hotness. Do you see this as a growing trend? Does it also have a negative effect on innovation or new IPs?
The Soon to Be Father

The number of stag nights and requests for paternity leave around the **Edge** offices seems to be increasing, for sure. Since we've touched on this topic before, surely our readers have a ton of handy tips by now. Send them in and we'll share them here. ■

ONLINE OFFLINE

Your responses to topics on our Web site at www.next-gen.biz and our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/edgeonline

Could Sony beat Nintendo to its Vitality Sensor? And do we care?

Will it change the way we game? No. Will it have any impact on gameplay features? Not really. Another gimmick in the long line of gimmicks.
Liam Rooke, via Facebook

It could help with pacing in survival horror games. Might be a good way of inputting random events in open-world games as well.
Chris Eustace, via Facebook

I agree – a survival horror where events unfold based on your heart rate would be pretty freaking sweet.
Imagine *L4D*'s AI Director waiting until your heart rate dropped to its usual rate and then deciding to throw a couple of Tanks your way.
Dan Entwistle, via Facebook

No. It's this kind of gaming tat I really have absolutely no time for. Even if a future *Metal Gear Solid* or something uses it in a 'unique and exciting way', really, just fluff.
Lukey Prince, via Facebook

You people don't have enough imagination. As much as I hate regenerating health, think about a game where you only started to heal when your heart rate returned to normal. Almost everything that is now an industry standard was once a gimmick.
Katie Fisher, via Facebook


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marshdavies.com



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Videogame enemies can't be too alien because, deep down, we all love killing humans too much

Has any artist had such a lasting death-grip on modern pop-cultural representation as HR Giger? Ever since his oozily xenobiological designs were made rubber-and-gunk flesh in Ridley Scott's Alien, his zany vagina-dentata vision has been the biggest game in town when it comes to visualising extraterrestrial life. Random recombination of images from Scott's film was the limit of the creativity on show in the Daniel Craig sci-fi western, Cowboys & Aliens, whose icky invaders feature a second pair of hands that emerge from a set of meaty chest flaps. Never mind the physiological sense that makes; just feel the homage.

In videogames, too, the alien is usually nothing more than a mashing-together of clichés. Gamers who have waited until this festive season to play *Resistance 3*, for example, will find a prettily slick, chocolate-boxy shooter, whose alien enemies are about as surprising as parking inspectors. In their predictable bipedalism and utterly generic variety (there are fast ones! There are slow-moving big ones! ZOMG there are jumpy-around ones!), the aliens of *Resistance 3* might as well be zombies – oh, wait, some of them actually *are* zombies. (Well, space zombies, like *Halo*'s Flood.) Since when did aliens become so tediously domesticated? Is the universe so utterly lacking in wild possibility? Is space, basically, rubbish?

I should say in fairness that *Resistance 3* has scintillating sound design, and sound too is characterisation. The throaty roar that you hear enemies emit when they die, even when you have sniped them from afar, is an unrealistic (at such distance) but gratifying piece of audio feedback, adding to the satisfaction of the kill while reassuring you that it has been accomplished; and the eerie yodel-whistling that announces the Long Legs' presence is authenticaly uncanny.

Alternative alien designs in videogames seem few. There is the small, comedy alien (Elvis in *Perfect Dark*; the panicky Grunts of *Halo*), who is just annoying. And then there is that old standby, the really massive alien, who might be a giant worm (rockworm in *Gears 2*; sandworm in *Lost Planet 2*), or otherwise resemble a dinosaur, reptile or squid blown up to physics-defying size for awe-engineering purposes (*Lost Planet 2* throughout is supremely good at this). Inevitably, such enormomorphs will remind us of Earth animals; and indeed they probably should. For this must be the paradox of alien creation faced by all designers: that aliens mustn't be too alien. When deployed as giant enemies, they must somehow tap into primeval, hardwired fears, and those fears are fears of lifeforms that we know and shun on planet Earth: snakes, spiders, scorpions, wasps, worms, moths, vampire kittens.

> Aliens should look either like giant Earth animals or like humans, bipedal and anthropoid

Team Ico's colossi are not supposed to be aliens, exactly, but on a recent hi-def catchup they seemed to me more otherworldly, with their wan eyes and golem-like stony architecture, than most videogame organisms supposedly evolved on an exoplanet. Yet the colossi, too, are designed to remind us of familiar zoological body-plans (ape, boar, bird), and indeed the game depends on that familiarity for its pummelling emotional force. The novels of Iain M Banks, by contrast, delight in deadpan descriptions of outlandish alien physiologies (starting with the relatively normal tripedal, four-eyed Idirans), but the risk in presenting such creative shapes to us in combat videogames is that we would just giggle down the sights at the ridiculous blobs.

Videogame aliens, it thus seems, should look either like giant Earth animals or like humans, bipedal and roughly anthropoid – because deep down, we like killing humans, and that is the operative constraint on xenomorphy. Aliens are just convenient stand-ins for people when we want to tickle an inviting sci-fi arsenal. (The producers of Cowboys & Aliens recently explained, tellingly, that the film featured aliens because it's now too politically troublesome to demonise human groups such as Native Americans.) This must also help to explain (along with Star Wars) why so many galaxy-faring alien civilisations in videogames like to use swords: it is basically the same old human medieval fetishism dressed up in laser light instead of sequined dressing-gowns.

What other options are there, after all, for alien design? The 'little grey man' associated with Area 51 conspiriology, with his bulbous bald cranium and massive solid-black eyes (Elvis from *Perfect Dark* again), is probably too childlike for all but the most crazed misopedists to enjoy shooting in the big face and tiny prepubescent body over and over again. And if that is true, then we can forget about reviving the look of Spielberg's ET, whose physiognomy was all too Terran, both very old and very young simultaneously; a cross between an adorable toddler and a wizened woodland sprite. Could you mow down hundreds of ETs with a Bullseye or Farsight – excuse me, Auger – if all they were doing was pointing their glowing fingers upwards and looking mournfully into the sky? You could? Jesus. Don't you know it's nearly Christmas?

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



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LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level Head

For the good of the medium, why can't game writers and game designers just get along?

I've been attending the Game Developers Conference Online in Austin for a number of years now. It's possibly my favourite game industry event for a number of reasons: all the happy reunions and hobnobbing of the main GDC but on a less gruelling schedule (as in, I actually have time to eat meals!), more time for conversation with the friends and colleagues I only see a few times a year, more space to digest the talks and trends. Plus, they have some fine bars in Austin, let me tell you.

GDC Online is also home to the Game Narrative Summit, which brings some of my favourite folks in the industry into one room for a few days of thoughtful presentations and dialogue on writing in games. I like the writers not just because they're friendly and make interesting conversation – nor because I was also invited to present this year – but because I respect the enormity of the challenges they face in their work.

It has, of course, been decreed that videogames are to be the 21st century's Great Storytelling Medium. This is our oft-brandished goal, and while a lot of that mandate is wrapped up in the ache for legitimacy and respect that gamers and game developers have felt for years, it's certainly plausible. We all believe that games are On To Something, or else we wouldn't be here.

We came because of a deep yet hard-to-define love, because of our memories of the times games moved us, the places they took us and with whom. And though those stirring moments are obfuscated amid our knowledge of great big design problems, primitive user interfaces and the ever-present urge to reach a wider audience, most of us harbour the belief that one day all of those problems will be resolved, that the sense of promise that led us to devote our lives to games will flourish. Games aren't "there yet", people say, but they will be, at some point in the future, once we figure all this stuff out.

It's to game writers that this cumbersome mantle ultimately falls, now more than ever. The long hardware cycle has created a glorious plateau where there's leisure to explore subtle evolutions in tech and design. Games look perfect. Developers have nailed the formula. This is our High Classical period, and we are carving subtle details into architectures we have mastered. If society still doesn't 'get' videogames, if audiences are still frustrated with a holiday season full of war clichés, if dialogue is still clunky and sexist, it must be the fault of writers. Masterful gameplay with dumb story? Blame the writers.

> The long hardware cycle has created a glorious plateau. This is our High Classical period

Here's the funny thing: attend the Game Narrative Summit and meet people who care deeply about storytelling. They would probably take issue with generic bombshells who have their bodysuits unzipped to their hips, with legions of fist-bumping marines, with obtuse dragon-explicating lorebooks and insular spaceship topographies. They attend events with the firm commitment of people who understand it's their mandate to buck clichés.

The writers I've met possess a similar breed of retiring shyness, of self-diminishment, peculiar to those who are accustomed to feeling misunderstood and irrelevant – the mien that those who've grown since childhood eager to see games ascend to the storytelling throne would immediately identify and recognise. They share the same odd coupling of passion and impotence, as if to shout: 'There is something we care a lot about, and the machinery that would lead us there is proving hostile and inflexible'.

Writers are quick to declare their respect for the primacy of design. All who've tried to work in the sphere that crafts narrative for games have been taught from day one to honour that primacy. Let the designers craft their brilliant machinery, let the writers comprehend it and work within its constraints. It's like they've been told a thousand times that the adults' table is not for them. The weird standoff between designers and writers is often declared, widely recognised, and yet potential solutions are half-acknowledged and poorly understood. Everyone knows they need to work better together, but it isn't happening.

This year at GDC Online I saw much made of the widening audience, the perma-integration of games and game mechanics with the social media that many people use every day. All humans play, and now nearly all humans in the developed world are online, and thus it follows that 'online' is a frontier already won for videogames, there to be taken. And barriers still stand?

The Game Narrative Summit hosted brilliant creatives dearly hoping to use the opportunities in a stable console arena and a wild new online frontier alike to finally progress the agenda. Other sessions held forth on engagement strategy, community management, monetisation tactics and everything but how to integrate storytelling.

It's possible that our wish to see games become a 'great storytelling medium' is just a thing we say when our in-laws don't understand why we bang our heads against electronic toys again and again. But if it's not, the integration between writers and designers must accelerate. Because both parties have been doing their jobs so well that it would be a shame if they couldn't do them together.

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media


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marshdavies.com

BRIAN HOWE

You're Playing It Wrong

A visit to Quasipedia, the fake encyclopedia, to research a storied take on the classic JRPG formula

Venal Fantasy IV

Venal Fantasy IV is a roleplaying videogame released over and over again by the publisher Tesseract Phoenix as part of the *Venal Fantasy* series. Known internally as Project Money-Printing Machine, the game first appeared on the Über Famicom in Germany (where it was actually titled *Venal Fantasy Drei*) and has been reissued with modifications for many other platforms. The story follows the chartreuse paladin Harvey as he tries to stop the wizard Landor from gathering the seven crystal MacGuffins and fucking up the world somehow. Along the way, the hero battles powerful monsters while trying to avoid a nefarious gang of cartoon girls who want to show Harvey their rudimentary yet protracted dances. A revolving cast of godlike ringers, frail back-row ghoul fodder and tragically foredoomed plot devices aid Harvey in his quest. The various versions of the game have collectively sold 20 billion copies, or nearly three times the Earth's current population.

Release history

First released in North America as *Venal Fantasy II*, though later North American releases were called *Venal Fantasy III* and *Venal Fantasy V*. The game has also been released as *Venal Fantasy I* (France and Belgium), *Venal Fantasy VI* (Australia and Antarctica), *Venal Fantasy Fita* (Bulgaria and Poland), and *Venal Fantasy Tor* (Mars only). Released in Japan for the WonderDuck Sepia as *Venal Fantasy Mangatype*, with additional crying and shouting. Re-skinned and released in North Korea as *Our Beloved Leader Kim Jong-Il Triumphs Over The Capitalist Devils, May The Buddah's Smile Shine On Him Eternally*. Curiously, the game has never actually been released under the title *Venal Fantasy IV*.

Versions of *Venal Fantasy IV* have been included in *Venal Fantasy Compilation*, *Venal Fantasy Chronicles*, *Venal Fantasy Omnibus*, *Venal Fantasy Evolution*, *Venal Fantasy Deluxe Compilation*, *Venal Fantasy Evolution Chronicles*, *Venal Fantasy Ultimate Deluxe Evolution Archive*, *Venal Fantasy Déjà Vu*, *Venal Fantasy Obsession* (which runs to upwards of 300 discs and comes packed with Vitamin-D cream, leg braces and an emu feather with miraculous powers of resurrection), and *The Truly Definitive & Comprehensive Venal Fantasy Library, Part I*. *Venal Fantasy Omega Edition* – with a 'new game plus' mode in which you get to play as 'Dancing Girl' – is forthcoming.

The original game has been modified for various platforms. The handheld 4DS version is a full remake with 3D graphics, holographic summon animations and Mochabo-dung scent emulators. The FunStation Portable version compiles the original game with a new prologue, 'Harvey in Utero', and an epilogue, 'The Senescent Years', which set a new gold standard for turn-based whittling and rocking-chair physics. The mobile phone version features cel-shaded graphics and crystal-swapping combat, while the Tiger Electronics handheld iteration is just *Shinobi* with a few liquid crystals shifted around and a sky-yacht on the faceplate. The MyFace version recasts the original game as a Mewgle-slaughterhouse sim with an emphasis on social transactions. A 1992 version sponsored by PepsiCo replaced the crystal MacGuffins with seven magical bottles of Crystal Pepsi, and changed the goal of Harvey's quest from saving the world to 'pure refreshment'. Another cross-promotional variant, which aimed to tap into a new audience while kickstarting an ageing star's career, pitted Harvey against country singer Crystal Gayle. Though it received poor reviews, this version remains notable for its distinctive packaging, which featured two metres of real human hair.

Reception

Venal Fantasy IV has been almost unanimously praised by critics, taking up 50 slots in GameBro's '100 Best Games of All Time' feature (*Myth Of Hilda* games filled the other 50). Game Hype Monthly gave the latest version an unprecedented rating of 10.5, writing, "As much as we love *VFIV*, we didn't think we could stand to play it again while new software piled up around our ears – but that's before we experienced it with the dialogue set in a slightly larger font". A dissenting opinion was lodged by Game Narc, which panned the game with a scathing score of 9.5.

Game Hype Monthly gave the latest version of the game an unprecedented rating of 10.5

References in popular culture

Venal Fantasy IV has contributed several concepts and phrases to popular culture. They include '*VFIV* shack' (a shed, garage or climate-controlled warehouse one leases to store his or her collection of *Venal Fantasy IV* games), 'Dotmouth' (a chronic condition, acquired from playing too much *Venal Fantasy*, which results in speech peppered with brooding ellipses), and 'Landored' – as in, "Dude, you so got Landored," meaning one who has been tricked into buying something he or she already owns.

Brian Howe writes about music, books, games and more for a variety of publications, including Pitchfork and Paste

#235



THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH

It's not all about you

www.bit.ly/it2QiG
Up-to-the-minute previews and reviews

Ask yourself this, if you think your ego can handle it: are you special? Not in the saccharine, 'everyone's special' children's TV sense of the word, you understand, but in the sense of being genuinely exceptional.

The answer, of course, is probably not. But no matter, games like *Prototype 2* (p70) are on hand to inflate your sense of self-worth. Like most story-based games, it casts you as the character around which the plot revolves, while everyone else is out to get you. And, like most open-world titles, it's happy to indulge you, the story waiting patiently while you busy yourself between missions with important tasks such as murdering hapless civilians and throwing cars at tanks.

One of the challenges of traditional MMOG design, conversely, is making players feel important in worlds that, frankly, don't revolve around them at all. The traditional solution has been the barefaced treachery of NPCs in games like *The Secret World* (p46), in which quest-givers hand out missions, thank you profusely for your efforts once the day has been saved, only to repeat the routine with the next hero to saunter by. Even the delicate class balances of traditional MMOGs are as much about egos as game design – the healer/damage-dealer/tank relationship carefully calibrated to ensure that everybody gets to feel important.

But the chance to be a cog in a much larger war machine is part of the appeal of *Planetside 2* (p40), a game that forfeits the illusion of individual importance in exchange for a sense of planet-wide scale, and the sense that your actions, accumulated alongside the efforts of so many others, might have a greater meaning on a grander stage. You can still feel important in *Planetside 2* – by becoming a renowned commander, for instance, or contributing towards a crucial victory at a key time – but it's a game that makes a brave decision: it makes its war feel big by making its players feel small.

MOST WANTED

Tekken 3D Prime 3DS
The King of Iron Fist Tournament heads to the palm of your hand. After a famine of information on the game over the past few months – as Namco bangs the drum of *SF X Tekken* – the 3DS brawler now looks to tick all the brand's traditional boxes. Expect plenty of uppercuts.

Persona 4: The Ultimate 360, PS3
The cast of Atlus' phenomenal PS2 RPG leaps on to home consoles through the cipher of Arc System Works' lush artistry. A 2D beat 'em up with more than a passing resemblance to *BlazBlue*'s hyper fighting, *The Ultimate* looks like a Japanese marriage made in heaven.

Guild 01 3DS
Level-5's variety show takes a single 3DS cart and crams it with bite-size titles. Grasshopper Manufacture's Suda 51 is contributing a 3D shooter, *Seaman* creator Yoot Saito is bringing an airport baggage-handling sim, and *Vagrant Story* maestro Yasumi Matsuno is delivering a fantasy RPG.



"The flight mechanics are a lot more dynamic than they were in *PlanetSide 1*," Higby says. "We want people to do barrel rolls. We want people to be able to take this Mosquito and outfit it for air-to-air or air-to-ground or anti-infantry. Right now, it defaults to having a 20mm chaingun for dogfights"

HYPE

PLANETSIDE 2

SOE rebuilds the massively multiplayer FPS for the modern age

Publisher Sony Online Entertainment
Developer In-house
Format PC
Origin US
Release TBC

The MMOFPS is an oddity. Since the pioneering of *PlanetSide*, no other shooter has truly earned the right to that first M. Some have been almost as populous, others have offered persistence, but none have managed to approach the scale of *PlanetSide*'s ceaseless global firefight in its vast open world. Even now, with the likes of *Dust 514* fencing off its 64-man battles into instanced locales, only one game looks set to trump *PlanetSide*'s claim to the MMOFPS crown, and that's SOE's free-to-play sequel: *PlanetSide 2*.

Astronomical player numbers are just one part of it. There may be a thousand involved in the conflict on any one server, coalescing into several-hundred-man flashpoints along an ever wavering frontline, but what sets *PlanetSide 2* apart from even its most ambitious peers is that this frontline stretches across three continents, each a freely explorable contiguous warfare space of eight square kilometres. The likes of *MAG* offer instanced, repeating battles – each assault reset with loss or victory. In *PlanetSide 2*, they emerge organically from the three factions' need for territory, targets selected as part of a global strategy, choices influenced by the flow of resources, the plan of assault fuelled and funnelled by the exigency of the landscape

PlanetSide 2 takes its name literally – this is a world, not a set of thematically linked levels. On this far-flung globe known as Auraxis, there are nights and days. Clouds billow over red rock bluffs and evaporate above baking sands, light streaking between their vaporous fluff in shafts – and none of these details could be called incidental. Night assaults offer a range of stealth tactics that astute commanders would be wise to exploit; cloud banks are real volumes, capable of concealing a fleet of attack craft, or hiding wounded dogfighters from would-be predators; the first rays of dawn may dazzle defenders as an assault force pours upon them with the light at their backs.

Massive is one word to describe it. Comprehensive is another. And clearly this is much of the reason why few games have looked lustily at *PlanetSide*'s MMOFPS crown. Having such numbers of players engaged in gun battles across vast, continuous, dynamic landscapes is a big ask. And the reason SOE has answered, rather than another studio, comes down to legacy. Not only did it have some of the technology and expertise left over from the first game, but the company's spent the intervening years deeply rooted in the MMOG space, fleshing out a powerful online platform that's now known as Forge Light.

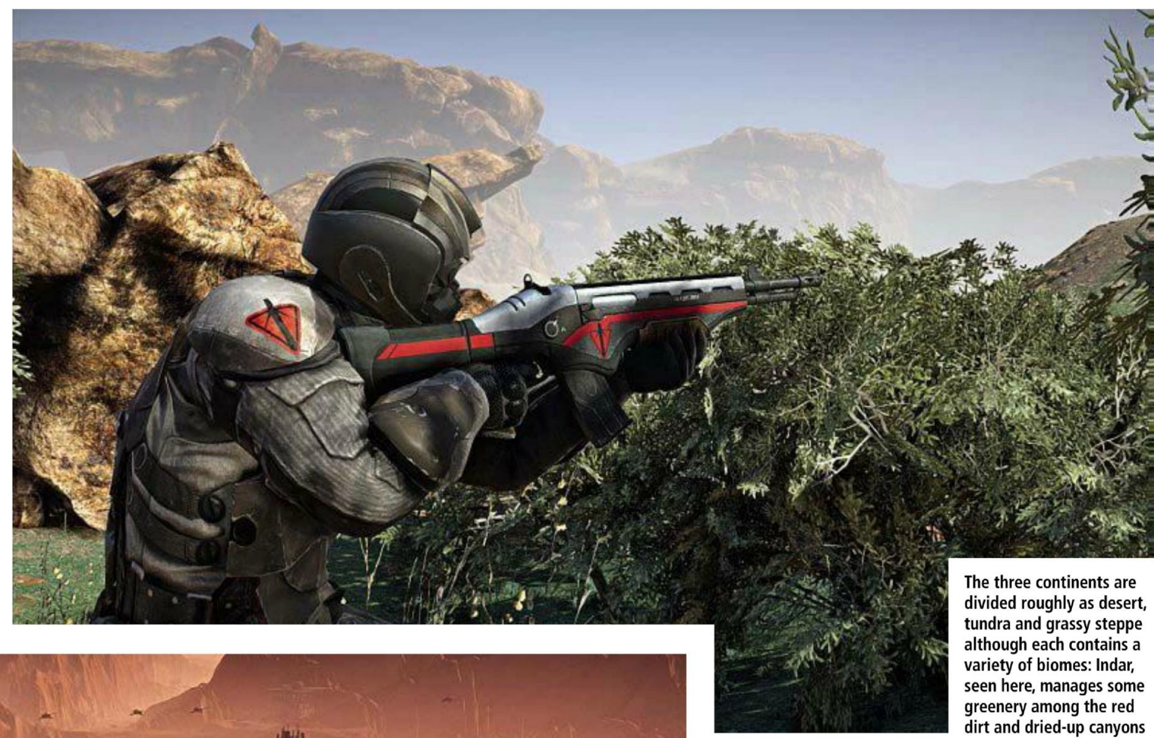
"We're a company that's been doing this for 13 years," says **Ryan Elam**, the game's technical director. "It's hard! There's a lot of

The Terran Republic were the original settlers on Auraxis, so the lore goes. Having having long been marooned, however, factions broke off to challenge its authority. Fittingly, the TR's black-and-red kit is all about austere efficiency





BELOW **Higby: "This continent is going to have nine primary facilities. Each region is basically controlled by a capital which could be a facility or a bunker, a tower or outpost – you won't need a 100-person assault to take those smaller pieces"**



The three continents are divided roughly as desert, tundra and grassy steppe although each contains a variety of biomes: Indar, seen here, manages some greenery among the red dirt and dried-up canyons



code – literally years of algorithms that have accumulated to make these things work. There are over 60 different components that make up the server and client aspects of the Forge Light engine, of which the renderer accounts for two or three."

SOE's previous games, like *Free Realms* and *Star Wars: Clone Wars Adventures*, may seem a far cry from the experience promised by *PlanetSide 2*, but they share a backbone of technology that enables thousands of players to come together, chat, customise their characters, exchange items, level up, form guilds and more. At a yet more granular level, SOE has had 13 years of experience in optimising its networking code and developing industry-leading interpolation, among other wizardry. Getting all this stuff "for free", as Elam puts it, has allowed *PlanetSide 2*'s coders a running start to tackle the more bespoke aspects of the engine.

It's clearly paid off – at least visually. Putting aside the colossal feat of simply getting all this stuff onscreen, the way it's composed is often beautiful. When a dusty beam of light catches the contrail of a rocket as it spirals up through the twilight, it's clear that *PlanetSide 2* has firmly put the stigmas of free-to-play budgets and broadest-base MMOG specs well behind it.

"People should look at it and see that it's got the same level of quality as every FPS on the market," says **Tramell Isaac**, senior art director. "When we were working on *The Agency* one of the comments we got a lot was, 'It looks pretty good for an MMO'. And that 'for an MMO' should not even be in the equation for me."

Game director **Matt Higby** takes us for a spin above a gargantuan installation which claws out from the centre of a rust-red canyon. The facility itself is vast – its three courtyards and central complex each conceal an amount of real estate akin to the average *Modern Warfare* level. The surrounding landscape boils off into a two-kilometre draw distance beneath the hazy heat of a setting sun. And this entire area might be filled with hundreds of fighters: aircraft needling the defences as they zip around the facility's fizzing barrier shield, tank regiments pummelling the outer walls and infantry falling in swathes beneath the beam-turrets that bristle from the ramparts. Later, Higby zooms in to examine a character model's collar, revealing a resolution capable of describing individual fronds of material – and there's nary a bit of texture pop to be seen.

"We don't take a lot of shortcuts. All of our shots are full-on ballistic simulations"

"We don't take a lot of shortcuts that you might otherwise take if you are trying to get 1,000 people on a server," Elam says. "All of our shots are full-on ballistic simulations. We have bullet drop and real physics going on – that's how important we feel the player skill part of the whole equation is. But there is a whole big cadre of tricks. Some of the tricks aren't romantic at all – like aggregating data.



Faction of a second

The three empires of the first game return. There's the Terran Republic in red and black – an efficient and fast authoritarian force. Freedom fighters the New Conglomerate are slower but rugged. Their blue-and-gold designs have a battered industrial quality. Then there's the oily purple Vanu Sovereignty – devotees of alien technology who favour plasma weapons and hovercraft.

"When I first started playing *PlanetSide* I was just a dude in QA," Higby says. "The rebellious nature of the NC really appealed to me. Now I'm more in a management role I lean towards the Terran Republic: discipline, order and the rule of law."



Though the landscape was initially procedurally generated, SOE's art team has been busy making it functional and characterful. Landmarks set each vista apart for easy orientation

We try and fool you into think things are happening in realtime. The things that are closer to the centre of your screen are sending you updates more often. Your team send you more updates. So we prioritise things – and we've been doing that throughout all our games. We also have better visibility systems, occlusion systems than the average FPS, so having areas where a point of interest blocks your view helps us, so you aren't constantly seeing the two-kilometre vista."

The scale isn't just there to wow, but to elevate strategy and tactics. The geography of the place has significance, and not just because it is handcrafted to create a deadly interplay between infantry, air and armour.

"How long it takes for me to capture a base and start getting resources from it is based on the amount of peripheral tiles that my empire holds," Higby says, explaining that the world map is divided into hexes. "So you could go capture a base behind enemy lines. It might take you 15 minutes for the capture to work and then the enemy comes in and it takes them five seconds to re-secure it. So maybe I'll do a pincer movement capturing territory on both sides [of an objective] and force you to fight a two-front war. That really allows us to have that realistic progression the way that battlefields do."

But this sort of coherent plan requires canny commanders: critical to *PlanetSide 2*'s success is a means of organising players into meaningful battles. Impressive as the player numbers may be, simply pouring hundreds of jarheads into a pointless punch-up over a near-useless objective won't cut it. As such, command is set across a multitude of tiers at every scale of the action, each with their own tree of upgrades and perks. Squad commanders set immediate ground-level objectives – highlighting targets to attack or capture, buffing the crew with one unlockable or allowing spawn-ins on the team leader with another. Guild leaders, meanwhile, might cultivate a speciality in armour, becoming the go-to tank regiment for the entire faction.

"I might be able to unlock something like a siege mode for my vehicle, or I can deploy it and now fire in a indirect artillery mode,"



www.bit.ly/u9gcmy
Screenshot gallery



Higby suggests. "Now if you're on my server you're going to want to join my guild – it's an aspirational thing. Just like some dude who wants to be a paratrooper is going to want to join the 101st Airborne. When my tanks roll over the hill people are going to go, 'Hell, yeah! Those guys are going to be able to turn the tide of battle'."

Higher-level commanders, meanwhile, might identify the longer-term goals for the war, the resources that will unlock faction-wide boosts, and where to get them. Though the details are subject to change, each of the resources – metal, auraxium and nanites – has a different benefit depending on your faction.

"The Terran Republic might use auraxium to get upgrades for their air vehicles," Higby explains, "whereas Vanu might use that to get upgrades for their ground vehicles and the NC might use it to get upgrades for their infantry. So everybody wants all the different resources, but if the Vanu is totally fucking you up with their [auraxium-enabled] railguns, then you know that you need to go capture auraxium on that map and deplete their reserves

But what happens if your commanders are total patoots? Higby: "One of the things we've talked about doing is having a system like Twitter where you 'follow' commanders and they get rank based on how many people follow them." And, of course, if they prove to be more Mainwaring than Montgomery, you can simply unfollow them.

Between high command and gruntwork lie many other career paths. Despite the game's selected MMORPG stylings, you aren't locked to any of the game's six infantry classes, and can switch between them at terminals. Nor do the different abilities that come with advancement or microtransactions create insurmountable inequalities between players. "We want to ensure that someone who's been playing it for five minutes and someone who's been playing it for five years are on an equal playing field," Higby says.

The sorts of skills you can buy or train respecialise your class rather than simply empower them. Higby calls them 'sidegrades' rather than upgrades, and says they allow you to radically alter your style of play. He uses the example of the Infiltrator: "You can spec out the Infiltrator class to be a really sneaky gadgety, sabotage-focused guy, and bring a bunch of C4 and motion detectors and sneak behind enemy lines, stab people and blow up their tanks. Or you could spec him to be a dedicated wilderness sniper. Our heavy assault character again has a dualistic role: he can either be very much an anti-infantry character or very much an anti-vehicle character. You can go play a medic and not really focus on being a combatant, but medics can be very much an in-your-face infantry fighter, too."

Each of the others – engineer, light assault and the mech-suited MAX class – are similarly flexible, and SOE considers each vehicle a class in its it own right, with a slew of sidegrades and abilities able to adapt its purpose. The Terran Republic's nimble

If your commander is more Mainwaring than Montgomery, you can simply unfollow them

Mosquito aircraft can be an adept dogfighter or armed for deadly strafing runs against ground forces. Galaxy dropships have the ability to act as a mobile spawn point when upgraded, giving them a protracted and vital role in battle, rather than sidelining them to a disposable troop transport.

Add to this the difference between factions, which have their own distinct styles of play and bespoke skill-trees, and the number of variables to balance is staggering. But after vaulting so many other hurdles in order to execute *PlanetSide*'s ambition, perhaps we should have a little faith in SOE. It has, after all, spent many years waiting for the original game's idea to come of age: at its release, few machines could do justice to its vision, and Internet connections struggled to service its demands. Finally, the rest of the world has caught up. Yet, even now, no other rival looks set to step up to the plate. An eight-year head start in a business this competitive? There's only one word for that achievement: massive. ■



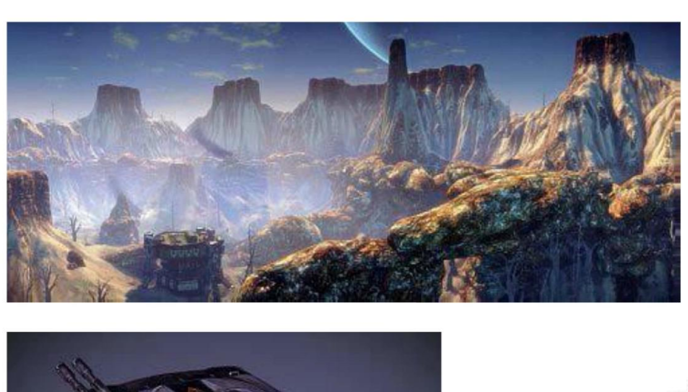


SOE president John Smedley recently predicted that *The Old Republic* would be the last subscription MMOG. Do you agree? Is free-to-play the way it's going to go for everyone, forever?
I think so. As more and more games start bringing the level of quality that today's free-to-play games have, it's going to be hard to compete with that. If I can get an excellent game for free, or an excellent game for $15 dollars a month… The thing that's keeping people playing subscription games right now is that their friends are still there. I think the only hurdle is players' perception of what a free-to-play game is. And that is a chintzy Flash game or some thing I play on Facebook with my sister. That's what a lot of core gamers think of as free-to-play games. And that's going to change.

***League Of Legends* must have had an effect – it's hard to think of a more hardcore and, well, meaner community.**
It has. I think a lot of games have. *World Of Tanks* is another game that's attracting a lot of people. *TF2* going free-to-play. *DOTA 2* – I'd be surprised if that didn't launch as free-to-play.

But isn't there a risk that, by not charging for something, you're sending out the message that it's not worth charging for?
It's easy to have that perception when the games coming out are garbage. But now there are people like us launching triple-A quality games as free-to-play, and that's going to change people's perception of what free-to-play is, what role brick-and-mortar stores have in videogames in the future. I definitely feel the wind is going to blow in that direction. But I don't think you'll see free-to-play as the primary kind of game on consoles for a while. I think as we start going towards using PSN and Xbox Live as distribution networks, then you will start to see free-to-play going there, but mostly for multiplayer games.

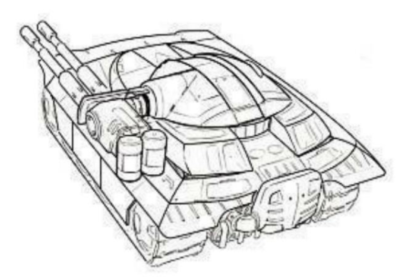
You're making a PC game – does that say something about current consoles?
No, not at all. It wasn't an 'Is this a platform we want to build for long-term?' decision, it was just a question of whether the platform was able to support the kind of game we wanted to make. As an example, porting *Free Realms* to PS3 was a monumental effort. It basically maxes the hardware on PS3. If you look at the visual fidelity on *PlanetSide 2*, versus *Free Realms*, at the draw distances we have, and the amount of stuff that's going on, you can get an idea of the scale of the effort it would take to get this on PS3. MMOs on a console? Very challenging.



LEFT ***PlanetSide*****'s always opted for a more saturated colour palette than most sci-fi shooters. Atmospheric haze and the lighting model give a sense of grand scale.** RIGHT **Thanks to their avid adoption of alien tech, the Vanu's ultra-heavy MAX class doesn't resemble the mech suits of the other factions**







ABOVE **The Prowler is the Terran Republic's medium tank – nippy and ideal against infantry. To its right is the Vanu's anti-grav Magrider, which can go where Terrans and NC can't**

RIGHT **The Mosquito and Liberator show the diverging aesthetics of the Terran Republic and New Conglomerate factions: the former rounded and sleek, the latter all punchy angles**



Design showcase

SOE has retained the rich colours of the original game but doesn't let that trivialise the harsh, militaristic feel of the factions

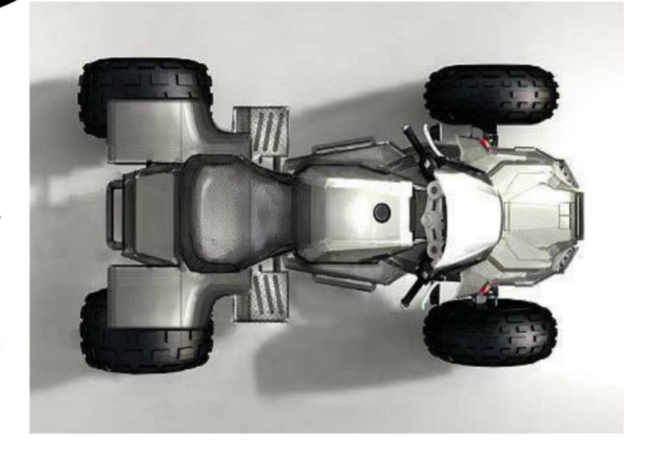
RIGHT **All the weapons are modular, with every butt, clip and barrel interchangeable. It means that there's a huge amount of customisation possible, and also helps the art team keep aesthetic parity among the factions' designs. It also means that if SOE wants to add a new weapon or upgrade after launch, it doesn't need to pile on too many extra downloads**







LEFT **"You might think everyone looks kind of grey," Higby says. "But these are all the default suits with no armour tinting on them." Players will be able to colour them within the spectrum permitted by their faction.** RIGHT **You can't ride vehicles from the start, but have to unlock the ability – just as with any skill. However, as in *Eve Online*, you can set up a queue and their completion bars will fill up over time, even while you're offline**





THE SECRET WORLD

Funcom's MMORPG attempts to drag the genre into the modern day

Publisher | EA Partners
Developer | Funcom
Format | PC
Origin | Norway/Montreal
Release | 2012

The Secret World is an MMORPG with an identity crisis. Which is to say that it has too many of them. "Everything is true", runs the strapline, meaning that every conspiracy theory, every secret society, every myth and every legend exists in its world. This is a modern-day Earth in which slick-suited, pious Templars vie with the self-interested Illuminati and the chaos-worshipping Dragons for control; an Earth where the Tokyo underground is overrun by mutated freaks and its platforms spill into cosmic nether-realms; an Earth where a sleepy New England ghost town can slowly fill with zombies, demons and actual ghosts. It's a world where the mastery of occult powers *and* automatic weaponry is the key to survival. A world, in short, that it's hard to imagine remaining secret.

But still, the modern-day setting is *The Secret World*'s primary draw. A walk through London – home of the Templars, and *The Secret World*'s major social and economic hub – is enough to confirm that. It's the part of our extended hands-on where the game manages to convince us it's taking place in the world we know – and that we're privy to the occult machinations and hidden powers behind the scenes. This is mainly due to a surprising level of detail –

Whereas the Templars and Illuminati have historical roots, green-clad chaos worshippers The Dragons appear to have been invented by Funcom to make up the numbers



www.bit.ly/vhVbBx
Screenshot gallery



While you can tear up mobs faster in a group, we were able to solo most of our quests. An ally is handy for tougher investigations, though

including some admirably accurate bollards – but also a sense of overwhelming relief that we're not journeying through yet another high-fantasy kingdom.

Indeed, on paper at least, *The Secret World* rejects most of the prevailing RPG rules. There are no classes here, nor levels – progression is instead measured through the abilities you unlock and the gear you receive. Naturally, this means that better-quality weapons provide levelling by proxy, but

There's a sense of relief that we're not journeying through another high-fantasy kingdom

there's still the sense that character progression is more freeform than in other roleplaying games. Early on, the game nudges our fledgling Templar in the direction of the society training room, and we try out the range of weapons on offer. After testing assault rifles, swords and wands, we settle on a pair of pistols – not because of something as restrictive as a character class, but because they go quite nicely with our character's long black trenchcoat. In another MMORPG this kind of decision would be short-termist at best, due to the constant threat of fresh loot rendering such a garment obsolete. But clothing in *The Secret World* provides no stat-altering effects whatsoever, making it possible to think about your character along just such aesthetic lines.

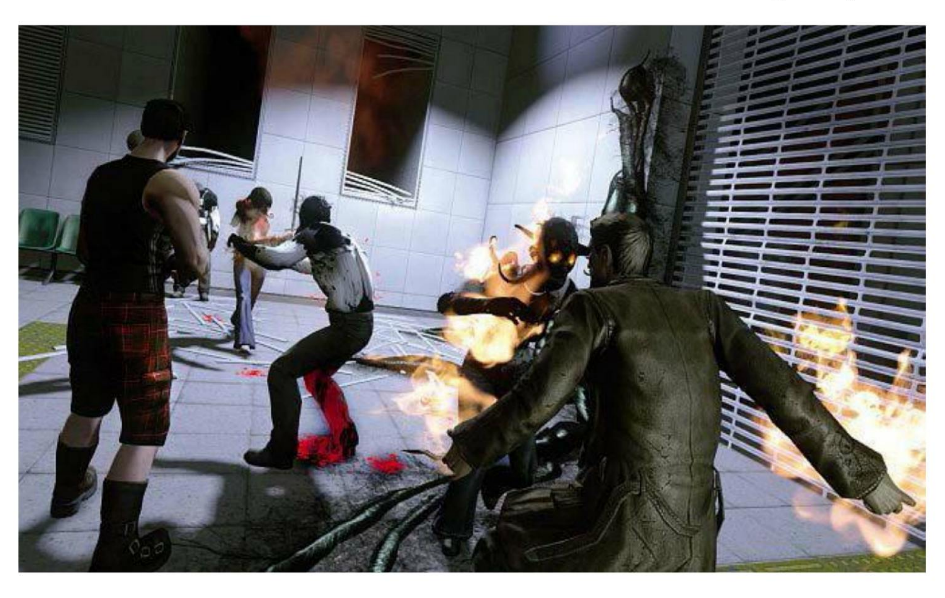
Despite our shooter-style arsenal, combat itself works according to typical, stat-dominated MMOG rules, with repetition of basic attacks filling up meters that allow us to deploy more powerful moves. While its familiarity disappoints, the system has been designed to focus as much on pre-battle planning as combat itself, due to the system Funcom has designed in place of a typical, class-based approach.

The studio's preferred analogy for your character build is the deck you might construct for a trading card game. Rather than levelling, your character receives ability points as you progress, which can be spent on both passive bonuses and new moves. You can equip only seven passive and seven active abilities at a time, however, meaning carefully thought-out combinations replace typical MMOG classes. In the three or so hours we spend with the game, we don't unlock enough abilities to move our character beyond what would typically be considered a damage-dealing build, but later, in preparation for an instanced fight through some monster-infested sea caves, the Funcom representative acting as our escort sets up a healing-focused character as effective as a priest in *WOW*, and provides one of our companions with a set of aggression-sucking, damage-absorbing abilities that do a fairly convincing impression of your typical tank.

But for all the thought that's gone into the combat and progression systems, it's the non-combat-focused quests that stick out. Most of our hands-on time with the game is spent in Kingsmouth, a quiet American harbour town overrun with the undead (and a fairly obvious nod to a certain novelist). After working our way through some typical MMOG questlines, we stumble upon an 'investigation' questline, 'The Kingsmouth Code'. It starts simply enough, asking us to follow a chain of arrows hidden in symbols carved into the town's manhole covers. It soon gets more complicated, however. So complicated, in fact, that we have to consult Google to find out that the Dutch painter Frans Hals tended to produce portraits, and the biblical Book of Kings chapter ten, verse ten refers to King Solomon in particular. These aren't the answers, mind – just



The Tokyo flashback pits you against the Filth, a corruption that has transformed humans into violently insane monsters. It sets up story details that will be returned to throughout the game



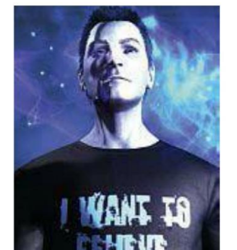
pieces of information vital to working our way through the quest.

Ragnar Tørnquist, creative director at Funcom, is particularly passionate about the obscurity of these quests. "I think *The Secret World* is so tied to the real world that when players go outside of the game to find a solution, their bond with the game will become even stronger," he explains. "Hals was a real guy. He did exist around that time period and there were some strange links in there that might tie him to the Illuminati. That sort of bond strengthens the game world rather than weakens it." A promised in-game browser will avoid the immersion-breaking alt-tabbing we have to perform during our demo but, even so, it's hard to shake the feeling that search engine results from forums and FAQ sites will torpedo these quests before they've even begun.

The focus on investigative questlines reflects *The Secret World*'s preoccupation with story in general. Fully voiced cutscenes begin each quest and, early on, we participate in an instanced flashback which sets up further narrative elements. It's clear that Funcom has invested a lot of faith in *The Secret World's* story. Whether that

Creative director Ragnar Tørnquist is passionate about the obscurity of these quests

story will be able to deftly thread its way through a universe in which every sci-fi conspiracy and fantasy trope you can imagine will feature is unclear, but if it's been written with the same disregard for cliché that underpins the systems behind the game, it may yet throw up surprises. ■



Class warfare

Our brief taste of multiplayer sees us playing a CTF variant as a member of one of three teams. We're given a melee-focused character, however, and can't help feeling ill-suited for the gametype. The requirement that we get up close to do any damage requires us to charge headlong into the scrums over artefacts (flags), and we rarely last long. It's exactly the situation where *The Secret World*'s freeform approach to character builds could pay off – seeing players tweak their character from round to round. Certainly, we wish we could deploy the ranged skills we'd been using in the PvE environments.



Q&A

Ragnar Tørnquist

Creative director, Funcom

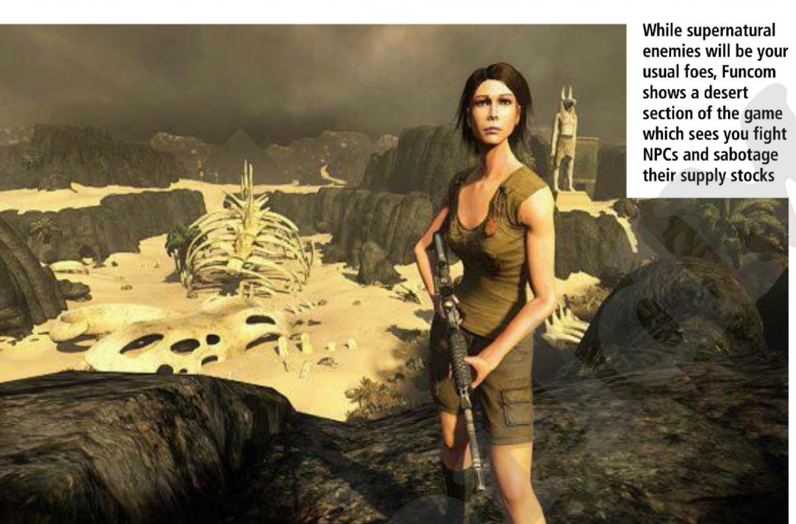


What do you dislike about levelling?
I like level-based games a lot of the time, because it's a nice and easy indicator that makes you immediately satisfied. I think that sometimes it's too easy to fall back on levels. I'm going to be honest with you: there were a lot of times during *The Secret World* when we said, "Argh, fuck it. Let's do levels." Because levels are easy. They're an easy way to gauge content, difficulty and give progression to the players. It's definitely been the hardest part of making this game to remove levelling. Removing classes is relatively easy, but removing levelling is incredibly difficult. I'm really glad we have stuck to it, because it gives this game a sense of wide open possibilities – you don't know exactly where you are in terms of progression but you know you're getting better and you are gauging the world differently. You're not looking at the monster's level; you are looking at the monster visually, thinking, 'That zombie looks pretty weak. I can handle that. That 20ft demon over there? I'd better wait. He's looking pretty badass'.

Has it really been easy to remove classes for team-based situations?
There is still the need for defined roles in teamplay, PVP and dungeons. Those roles are important but they don't have to be an exact template we lay out for you. You can be a tank in lots of different ways. You can be a tank in a lot of different ways we haven't thought about yet. And that's what we want to accomplish. We want players to be able to go, "This is probably a standard tank build. This will be safe. We'll be OK with this." But we also want people to think, '[But what] if I combine it with Chaos Magic, then I use the blades there?' Uncovering the possibilities of all these hundreds of abilities is such as fascinating idea and something we are really striving for.

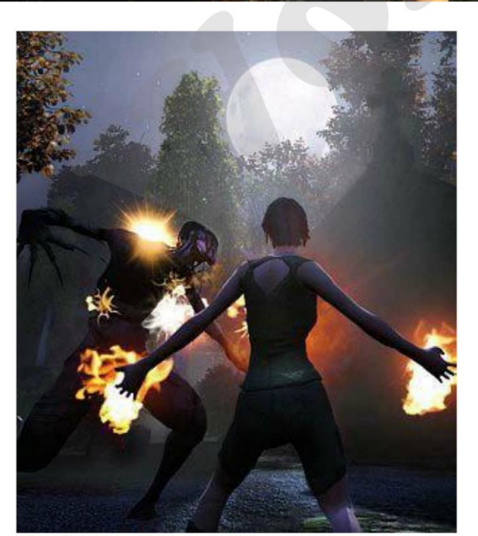
Are you worried about optimum builds becoming ubiquitous?
I am actually hoping for that to happen because it's going to be fun. You're going to see flavour-of-the-week builds, and everyone is going to start [using them] in PVP. Then, because of the whole skill system, people are going to be like: "What if we actually use this build and combine that with this? These guys are going to be completely ineffective against us." And suddenly that build of the week has been completely destroyed by the next one. At a certain point maybe there will emerge optimal builds, but of course we are going to be monitoring this and adding new abilities to mix it up.

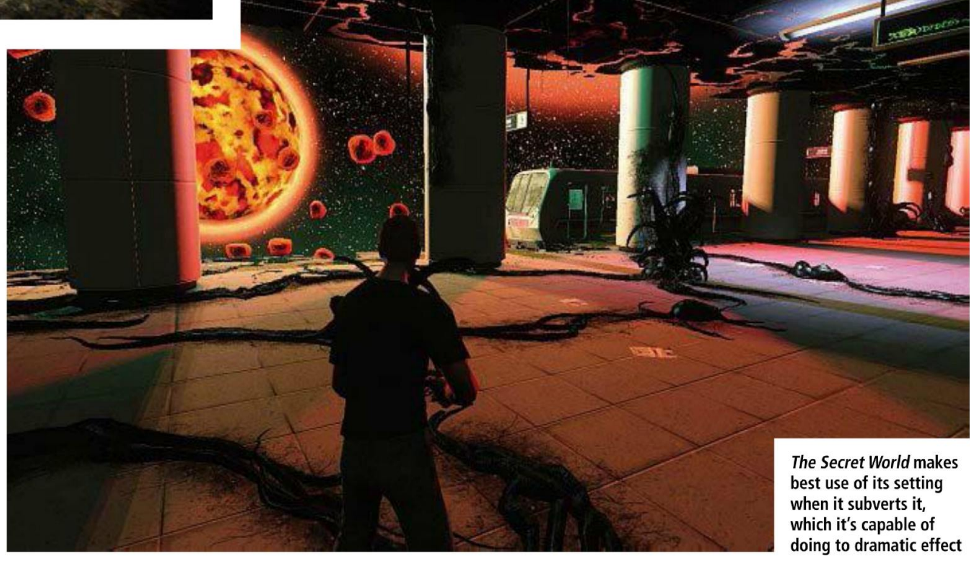
Various magical styles exist, with differing effects. For group situations, it's the gun wielders and the magic users who seem to do the most damage



While supernatural enemies will be your usual foes, Funcom shows a desert section of the game which sees you fight NPCs and sabotage their supply stocks







The Secret World makes best use of its setting when it subverts it, which it's capable of doing to dramatic effect



H | Y
P | E

MASS EFFECT 3

Still defending the galaxy – but this time you're not alone

Publisher | EA
Developer | BioWare
Format | 360, PC, PS3
Origin | Canada
Release | March

The galaxy's at war. It's happened before, admittedly, but rarely has a cosmic conflict had such a build-up. Across two games now, BioWare has sown the seeds for the Reapers' invasion of civilised space. And so have we – the choices made as Commander Shepard cascading down through *Mass Effect* into *Mass Effect 2*, and in turn, our decisions made in the second game laying the groundwork for this final instalment.

Mass Effect 3 sees Shepard touring the galaxy, in the hope of convincing the Citadel races to present a united front against the genocidal machines. But this particular invasion promises to be more than simply the narrative motivation behind one last galactic round trip. It's a war in which players are going to actively participate – and much of this participation will be through *Mass Effect 3*'s new multiplayer modes.

"*Mass Effect 3* is an all-out galactic war", explains **Aaryn Flynn**, general manager of BioWare Edmonton studio. "Defeating the Reapers will require every single resource at your disposal. It starts with the main game, but players will have the chance to fight the Reapers across multiple platforms with a system we've designed called 'Galaxy at War'."

The invasion of the Milky Way, in other words, will take place on many fronts. While the singleplayer experience is still where the bulk of the narrative will be contained, time spent in *ME3*'s co-operative wave-based mode will contribute towards Shepard's quest. And though Flynn won't elucidate at this stage on what is meant by "multiple platforms", it's easy to imagine time spent on Facebook games or iOS releases (such as 2009's *Mass Effect Galaxy*) contributing towards the war effort as well.

> *"Defeating the Reapers will require every single resource at your disposal"*

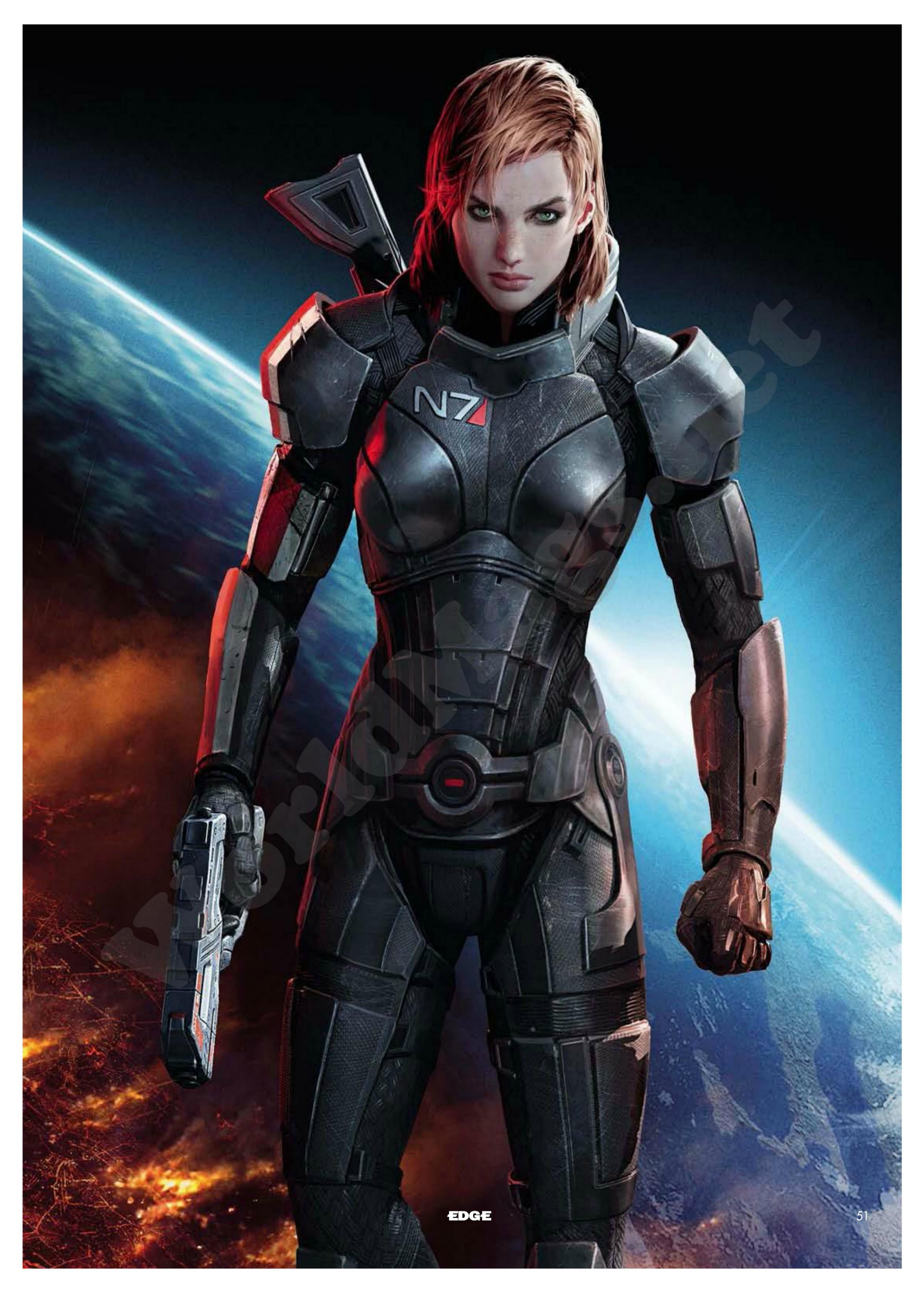
In practice, this will work via a fairly straightforward metric. The singleplayer game will feature a 'readiness level', measuring exactly how prepared Shepard and his allies are to try to repel the Reaper threat. Naturally, Shepard's actions in-game will be the primary way in which the meter is filled, but levelling a character up in the co-op mode before 'sending' them to fight in the wider war allow you to give it a boost. It's a clever spin on *Call Of Duty*'s Prestige system, asking you to sacrifice accrued skills and equipment and start the multiplayer mode from scratch – not for pride's sake, but for progress within



www.tinyurl.com/cebdx59
Screenshot gallery



MAIN **Thanks to fan demand, Jennifer Hale's female Shepard has finally found her way into the game's promotional art – gaining a brand-new default face and haircut in the process**


N7



MASS EFFECT 3



BELOW **Co-op enemies are lifted from singleplayer, and include mercs, Cerberus operatives and various species of Husk. The sight of a Krogan Husk charging you is enough to encourage the use of tight group tactics**





Shepard has a new melee attack that sees his or her wrist-mounted omni-tool transform into a blade. Enemies have picked up new defences of their own, however – shields make frontal assaults unwise

a different mode. "Sending in a character," Flynn explains, "might push you over a threshold to unlock something new in the singleplayer game."

The co-op mode itself is built around battles taking place at 'key locations' across Citadel space, with groups of four players holding off waves of enemies in small arenas. Despite the occasional objective tasking us with, say, downloading encrypted data while fighting Cerberus operatives, the focus here is undeniably on combat. That a mode can be built around *Mass Effect 3*'s cover-based gunplay at all is a reflection of how far the series has come since the stolid shooting of the first title, but we already can't help worrying if BioWare is subjecting its shooter mechanics to an excessive amount of stress. Without the narrative propulsion of the singleplayer mode, holding back waves of Husks – even with three allies – becomes repetitive surprisingly quickly, our biotic-equipped Asari commando soon resorting to rinse and repeat tactics. The relatively uninteresting setting – a frosty, container-filled spaceport – doesn't help either.

There's more to the mode than we've seen here, of course. Flynn refuses to be drawn when we ask if the series' penchant for moral choices will be somehow worked in, though since BioWare has managed to work group-based decision making into the studio's Star Wars MMOG *The Old Republic*, we'd hope so. He's keen to sell some of its other features, however, including fully customisable weapons for your characters, as well as the opportunity to try out different character classes to the type you're using in the





You can customise multiplayer characters as in singleplayer – though we can't imagine getting too attached to them. Classes will be split between races, ensuring every species has a distinctive feel

singleplayer game. There's also a considerable increase in difficulty from the singleplayer mode – the increased toughness of each wave of enemies (of which there are 11) promising to test players who've never progressed beyond the main game's normal mode, and requiring – eventually, at least – some genuine teamwork.

Levelling up between rounds gives us a chance to test *Mass Effect 3*'s skill-trees. While BioWare has kept *Mass Effect 2*'s tighter focus on more tangible powers, there's definitely a longer list of skills this time around – and a greater level of customisation, too. We choose to level up the Warp ability, and are taken to a sub-menu that presents us with a choice of improving its damage, radius or cooldown time. It's easy to see how a character could be evolved to suit your playstyle – and, therefore, how it might not be as easy as you'd think to give them up. Characters sent to become foot soldiers in the war effort are lost forever – they'll fill your Galactic Readiness meter, but they won't actually appear in the singleplayer game.

With that singleplayer game set to deliver a payoff on player's sense of investment in an entire trilogy – revealing the consequences of decisions made across half a decade and two previous games – it's hard not to see the multiplayer as comparatively lightweight, offering the exact same mechanics without the sense of character and context. The fact that BioWare's galactic conflict is going to spill beyond the bounds of its singleplayer campaign is an intriguing one, but *Mass Effect 3*'s primary draw isn't these battles, it's the story that's going to see you end the war. ■

Q&A
Aaryn Flynn
General manager, BioWare Edmonton



Was the combat system of *Mass Effect 2* multiplayer-ready, or have you made changes since to make it a better fit?
We made changes. We improved a few things in the singleplayer; it's more actiony, there are more animations, Shepard has more ways of interacting with the environment – changing cover and climbing ladders, stuff like that. It's surprising, actually – I wouldn't have guessed that [added verticality] would change the feel of a level or an environment as much as it does. And all that stuff has carried over into the multiplayer as well. In that sense, I think it's definitely the best time to introduce multiplayer. But there's also a story reason. The idea is that even as Commander Shepard is racing through his adventure to defeat the Reapers, there are an infinite number of stories going on around that. That's what the multiplayer is about – showing that there are other things happening.

Will players need to rely on multiplayer to fill the Readiness level in singleplayer?
No, and that's been very much a conscious decision. The Readiness meter is very important to the game. I'm not sure of the exact moment we introduce it, but because of the 'Galaxy at War' theme, it's designed to be something that's as ever present as possible. In some ways, it might make design sense to more tightly couple the singleplayer and multiplayer modes, but we don't want to say, "You must do this mission to unlock something in the singleplayer game". Instead, we wanted to have a level of distraction that ensured players could decide.

***Mass Effect*'s classes were designed for a singleplayer game. Have you tweaked them to account for teams of players?**
Certainly we've learned a lot. We're learning a lot now. I'm really excited to get the game out there and to watch the telemetry. You do have to be aware that when four people are playing at the same time, they might all choose the same class, or all different classes. The skills you've got here aren't necessarily the final ones. We haven't nailed down if they're going to be the same as the singleplayer game yet.

Have you needed to make adjustments for the possibility of playing alien races, too?
The idea with the Krogan, for instance, is that they need to communicate a sense of mass. We have to change the mechanics to really communicate weight. It's one of the challenges, but we'll keep iterating on it until we get it just right.



FEZ

Mix Mario, Zelda, Ico and Myst, rotate three times and serve

Publisher Polytron Corporation
Developer In-house
Format 360
Origin US
Release 2012

Fez is a platformer in an odd place. Described by designer **Phil Fish** as "a vertical *Super Mario*," it's a game both with its own fanciful sense of character and drenched in the influence of others. It would be impossible to play the opening hour without being reminded of at least half a dozen other games. Yet it would be equally impossible to deny its distinct personality.

For want of a better explanation, *Fez* is a 3D platformer played in two dimensions. It sounds illogical, but the cardinal mechanic is anything but. The universe is built as a fully three-dimensional 'box-world' which you can only view from one side at a time. At first, switching perspectives twists the world and allows you to use previously unreachable platforms and collect cubes – shards of a larger, world-stabilising cube. This is *Fez* at its most basic – and perhaps a poor example compared with later puzzles, which make much more complex use of the mechanic.

Initially, it brings to mind *Echochrome* or, on a totally different axis, the gravity-twisting platformer *And Yet It Moves* – though its visual design suggests a different inspiration. Imagine someone had knocked that game on its back and built a cardboard homage to the cheerful early village from every adventure-RPG, and you're halfway to understanding what Fish and the Polytron team have done.

"I'm basically wearing my influences on my sleeve," Fish says. "I make no apology that it's a *Mario-Zelda-Ico-Myst* mashup. It's very clear to me where each aspect of the game came from and where I'm lifting from the games that I grew up with and I loved.

"I don't know if it's just something that's in the zeitgeist right now these days. Like even *Meat Boy* has some parallels with *Fez* [even though] you couldn't have two more diametrically opposed games."

> ***"I make no apology that it's a mashup of the games that I grew up with and I loved"***

Yet even the dream-like image of a *Mario-Zelda-Ico-Myst* hybrid would not describe *Fez* adequately, thanks to its unique mechanics. The feeling of constantly adjusting the world and the experience of stopping your character mid-saunter to mull over particularly vexing levels is actually one that is immediately associated with *Braid*.

"When *Braid* came out I was already working on *Fez*, and even though the actual game mechanics have absolutely nothing to do with each other I was like, 'Yeah, whoa, there are some thematic similarities here'. There are some things in common with these two games. I feel the same thing about *Sword & Sworcery*."

But while Superbrothers' iOS adventure matches *Fez* in terms of ambience and aesthetics, *Braid* matches it in terms of the game's central rewards – brief moments of epiphany. With every few turns of the world, players undergo a process of consistent realisation. The way the 3D world spins on its axis in a twist of colour and light eliminates any discomfort from this process until it becomes almost subliminal.

This combination of logical process and whimsical attitude is something it also shares with *Portal*, in that the game is not so much revealing solutions to you as it is allowing you to reveal them to yourself, often at your own pace.

But these are only the first obvious influences. Many have recently praised *The Binding Of Isaac* as an unconventional yet modernised take on *The Legend Of Zelda*'s exploration. But the feeling is that *Fez* is truer to the spirit of orienteering and voyaging of *A Link To The Past* than it is to the combat and item-focused dungeon-crawling of the NES original. Top-down 2D indie RPG *The Binding Of Isaac* is a

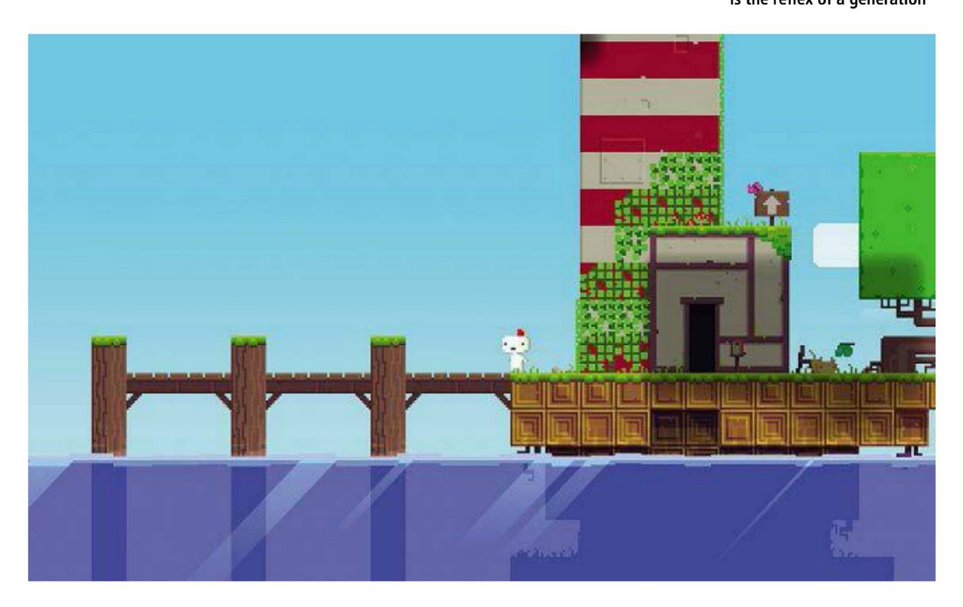


www.bit.ly/rZuWsD
Screenshot gallery

The floating islands of *Fez* evoke the visions of Hayao Miyazaki such as Howl's Moving Castle. Many ARPGs get nods, too



Fans of classics are most rewarded. Even the controls act as punctuation in a love letter to the platformers of old. *Fez* recognises that pressing 'up' – rather than a context-sensitive action button – to enter a doorway is the reflex of a generation



major nod to this original, in that it encourages you to find strange items in an instantly recognisable world, whereas *Fez* asks you to collect relatively functional things in a bright new one.

Still, a major similarity is evident. Both Team Meat and Fish's studio Polytron are bold and unambiguous when it comes to plucking elements of play from their childhood favourites, resulting in what could be described as respectful caricatures. In *Fez*, that much is obvious from the Sega-blue skies and emerald grass.

Fish assures us that there is a darker, melancholy subtext to the game. If such a wistful air is present, it certainly isn't noticeable upon first playing. Our demo is peppered with an inescapable humour and self-parody. If *Fez* had its tongue any deeper into its cheek, it would be considered a new form of body modification. Dot, the floating cube of warped colour that helps you along the way, is responsible for many of these moments of light relief, at one point twinkling in front of the player and exclaiming "Hey, listen!"

The owls that rest in the world's cuboid treetops are likewise an obscure reminder

Fish assures us that there is a darker, melancholy subtext to the game

of *Super Mario 64*'s own helpful owl. These birds won't carry you to the top of levels, but during our playthrough Fish vouches for them anyway: "Owls are very important."

But we never find out exactly why. It's just another revelation waiting to happen, in a very odd place. ■



Sofa, so good

The more complex puzzles might require a lot of logical inference and twisting of the landscape (never has 'lateral thinking' been a more apt phrase) but the platforming itself is strikingly forgiving. A fall that results in death will see your character reappear on the solid surface you most recently graced. This feels less like hand-holding and more like an intentional design decision that limits the player's frustration at having to re-traverse the towering levels. Fish's idea is that exploring the world is a decidedly relaxed "controller and sofa" affair, with the real challenge being in the many tests of spatial awareness.

Q&A
Phil Fish
Lead designer, Polytron Corporation



Was the idea of perspective shifting a response to so many 2D platformers?
Not really. Originally the core rotation mechanic came from this other game before *Fez* that I worked on with this dev called Shawn McGrath. We were going to make this other game together and he came up with the idea to make this 3D world but that you could only see it from three different points of view. And I was going to help with the art and it was going to have this origami aesthetic, like folded paper. Early on, before we even had a playable prototype, we had this big disagreement on a core design issue. He wanted to go in that direction, I wanted to go in the awesome direction, and we just had this kind of… falling out.

What happened?
I was really attached to my version of the idea and then shortly after that I came up with the whole pixels-are-actually-cubes aesthetic, instead of folded paper. I thought it was the perfect symbiosis of gameplay and art – the theme of the pixel actually being a cube that is unseen. When I realised that, I was like, "Of course! Pixel art!" But the original thing wasn't even my idea – I just ran with it.

Your inspirations are very noticeable. How did all these things come together?
Originally the basic idea was to make this *Mario-Zelda* hybrid, like a 2D platformer that is about exploring this open world. And I wanted the open world to be played in any order – like the first *Zelda* where you can play any dungeon in any order – and then there was *Ico*, from which we took the lonely isolation feeling and somewhat melancholic nostalgia. And there are a lot of metapuzzles in the game that people haven't really seen [yet] that are very much inspired by *Myst* and *Riven*. So I don't have any problem with making these little references in the game just so I can say, "Yes, this is where this came from".

That's most noticeable in the character of the Navi-like cube which follows you. How did you develop it as a character?
I wanted to have a little bit of humour – but not too much. Like, Dot the little helper character, she was very serious in the beginning. There was this weird mathematical god subtext to her. And I was like, wow, this is kind of stuffy, it's not very interesting. So at some point I rewrote all her dialogue to make it less serious and more stupid. I basically started writing her dialogue with my own voice. She talks like I talk and uses expressions that I use.



Syndicate takes place in a world where mega-corporations are the reigning superpowers, fighting wars for each other's technology behind the scenes

SYNDICATE

Starbreeze brings its unique feel to EA's unlikely reboot

Publisher EA
Developer Starbreeze Studios
Format 360, PC, PS3
Origin Sweden
Release February

Some turrets can't be directly breached. Instead, we weave between cover and duck into a nearby security station before hacking it, shutting down defences and opening doors

Forget, for a minute, discussion of whether or not *Syndicate* should even be an FPS, and consider the precise nature of the studio that EA has entrusted with the task of making it so. Starbreeze made its name with the tangible physicality of *The Chronicles Of Riddick*, a game defined by the very un-FPS feeling of the wet smack of knuckles against bone. Leaving Butcher Bay behind, it moved on to the gruesome body horror of *The Darkness*. This is a studio, in short, that refuses to see a firstperson perspective as a mere point of view, it's a studio that embraces the opportunity to palpably embody the player. And it's an attitude in no way diminished for this most delicate reimagining of a game which, many would say, thrived on a cold sense of disconnection.

We're playing *Syndicate*'s co-operative multiplayer, which sees you, as part of a team of four agents, assaulting the strongholds of other corporations in order to steal their tech. The presence of three other agents makes this mode nominally closer to the original than the entirely separate singleplayer campaign, though naturally, the modes feel similar. And that feeling is a distinctly Starbreeze one – a sense as far away from being a floating camera with a gun strapped to its side as is possible to imagine.

It's more than being able to look down and see your feet. It's the way your head bobs, the way sunlight catches your eye, or the slightly too harsh-on-the-ears rattle of your assault rifle's report. It's in the sound of your panting breath when you sprint, and the brutal immediacy of melee finishers. You'd think that the layer of techno-warfare *Syndicate* demands would diminish the

The presence of three other agents makes co-op mode feel closer to the original

impact of Starbreeze's design principles; instead it's enhanced them, the layers of static and fizzling sound effects implying delicate, sophisticated technology buckling under the stress of a pitched gunfight.

The area we're fighting in is the visual antidote to the moody, Blade Runner-reminiscent shots released so far. A rooftop underneath a beating sun, the bright colours are more reminiscent of *Mirror's Edge* than *Deus Ex*. And yet more colour is provided by the presence of a visor mode that allows you to spot the bright orange silhouettes of



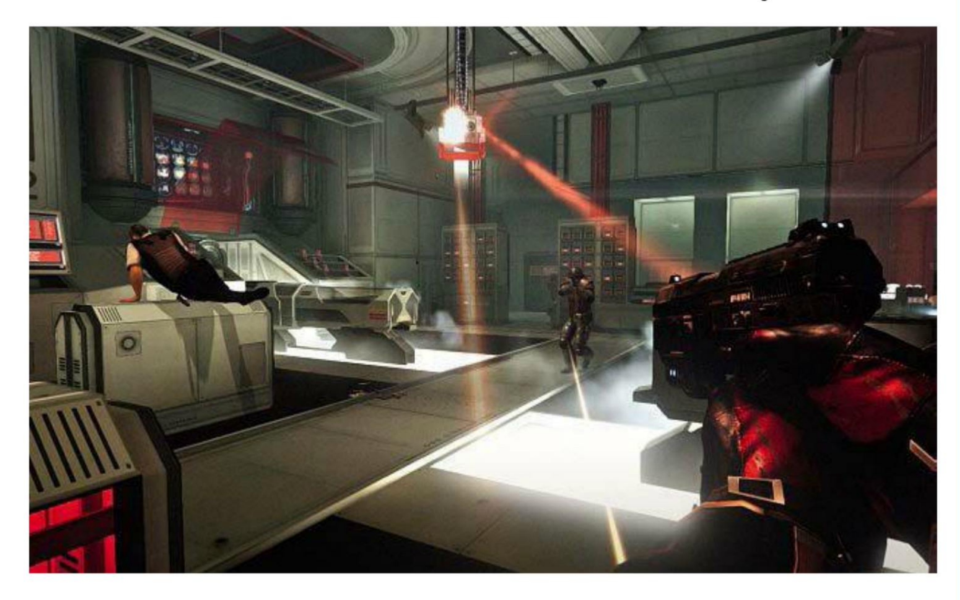


www.bit.ly/ocGvv0
Screenshot gallery



SYNDICATE

Weapons have punch and weight, and though the assault rifle, pistol and sniper rifle we try feel rather standard, Starbreeze has also shown some more interesting toys, including a gauss gun capable of firing around corners



enemies through walls. While some will bemoan the fact that *Arkham Asylum*'s detective vision, having found its way into a fair proportion of thirdperson games released since, has jumped the species barrier to infect the FPS as well, its inclusion here makes sense. Enemies attack in great enough numbers and do high enough damage that being able to duck behind cover and plan your next attack with the aid of the visor simply evens the odds.

While not strictly class-based, the co-operative mode will offer a wide enough range of weapons and customisations that players will be able to tailor their loadout for specific roles. The character we're playing feels rather like a jack of all trades, unfortunately, but we're shown a sniper option picking his way through the very same mission, helping out teammates by hanging back and taking out awkwardly positioned targets.

The breaching mechanic, which sees you hacking into equipment, defences and even non-player characters by holding down a bumper, seems relatively simplistic at this stage, being mainly used in fights against slow-moving, shotgun-wielding soldiers encased in impenetrable armour. After we breach their electronic defences the armour fails, allowing us to quickly do as much damage as we can possibly manage.

What could potentially work in singleplayer feels faintly farcical here, as enemies designed to hold their own against a team of four circle-strafing agents manage to soak up an obscene amount of bullets. Hopefully, further development of our character would see more interesting breach-based abilities introduced. It's a notion hinted at by the way our character finishes off one of these enemies – a melee takedown that involves stabbing him in the neck with some kind of hi-tech

In co-operative mode players will be able to tailor their loadout for specific roles

syringe and extracting the data that acts as currency for future upgrades.

This new *Syndicate* was never going to feel like the original Bullfrog game. Fans of *The Darkness* and *The Chronicles Of Riddick*, however, can at least take comfort in the fact that it feels like a Starbreeze one. How well the studio is able to marry its signature take on firstperson combat to a singleplayer mode that captures some of the original's spirit remains to be seen – but it clearly hasn't let *Syndicate*'s formidable legacy compromise its own distinctive approach to a gunfight. ■

Q&A
Jeff Gamon
Executive producer, EA



Co-op modes have become increasingly popular in recent years – can *Syndicate* offer something distinct?
With co-op specifically, we've always seen it as having an equal billing with the singleplayer campaign. When you look back at the original *Syndicate*… when people talk about it in the context of this new game, they talk about recreating the world, the agents, the weaponry. But the actual missions in the original were you controlling four agents, and those agents functioning together as a group, invading enemy territory, stealing their tech, killing their targets and then coming back out again. So it seemed only natural that we should include a co-op game that could evoke the original in such a clear way.

Why did you opt for a standalone co-op campaign?
Well, there's a light element to the co-op campaign and its story. But this is where we ended up because we wanted something evocative of the discrete missions of the original.

You've eschewed classes, but are hoping to encourage players to assume distinct roles in their teams. How will that work?
All the agents, on a basic level, are essentially the same. As you progress through the game you rip technology from bosses, and that goes into a research pool. You can use that data to unlock new breach applications, you can upgrade your existing breach applications, and you can augment your agent's chip and weaponry as well. Ultimately, if you max out the game, you're going to end up with all this stuff. But in terms of fulfilling team-based roles, that's all in the loadout. To compete at the higher levels you need to function together as a group effectively. You're going to need someone with healing and shield buffs, stuff like that. You're going to need someone with long-range skills who can stay back and snipe, and you're going to need assault guys to get in there and tank for the team.

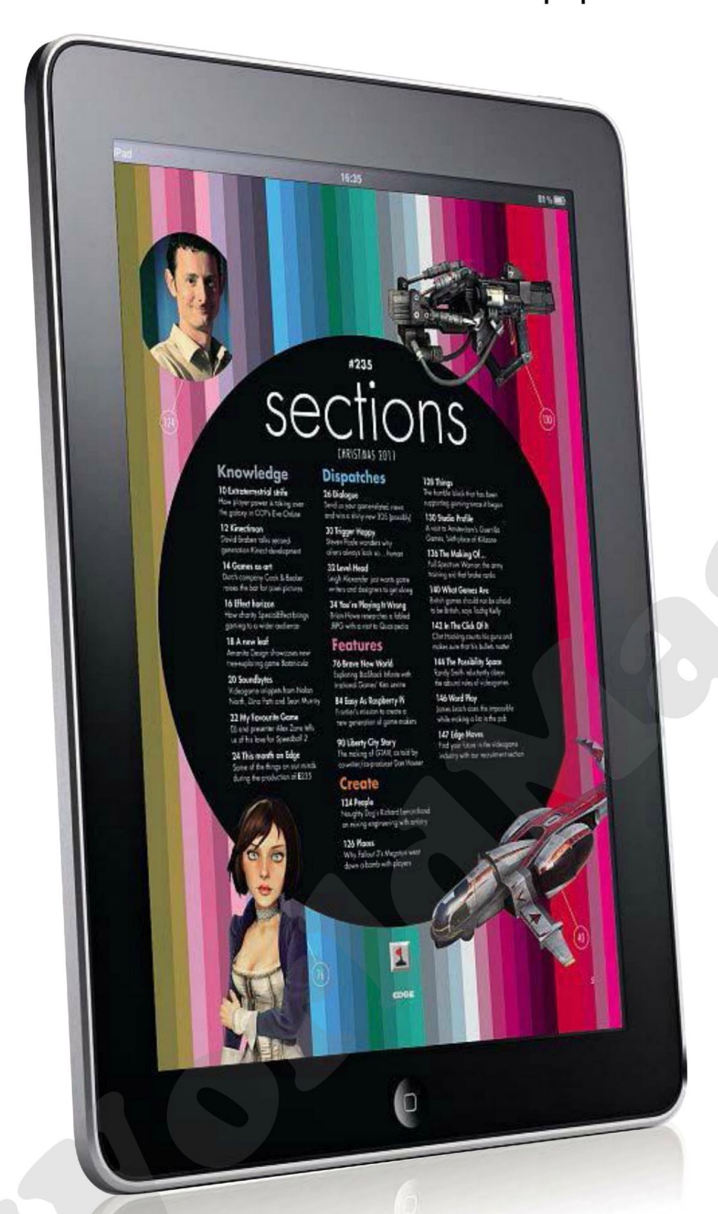
Did you ever consider reining in the distinctive, physical feel of Starbreeze's games?
We wanted them to do something fresh and interesting with *Syndicate*. Their games are strong on narrative, with immersive deep storytelling – we wanted that. And, as you mentioned, the physicality – they bring a strong action-adventure element to the firstperson genre that we really wanted to bring in. We didn't want to make a straight firstperson shooter. We wanted something more specialised.

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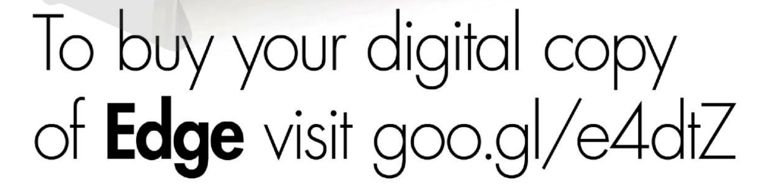
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HYPE

RESIDENT EVIL:

OPERATION RACCOON CITY

The veteran SOCOM developer tries to teach an old game new tricks

Publisher | Capcom
Developer | Slant Six Games
Format | 360, PC, PS3
Origin | US
Release | 2012



www.bit.ly/smlMdW
Screenshot gallery

On first contact, *Operation Raccoon City* looks and feels like – gasp – a re-skinned *SOCOM: Confrontation*. While Slant Six's online PS3 shooter picked up a following with its clinical approach to military fidelity, there was a lack of flair and personality that left a cold chill. Appropriate, then, that Slant Six's venture into the world of *Resident Evil* should be from the perspective of the cold, clinical clean-up squad Umbrella Corp sends in to clear its tracks.



A squad-based shooter developed at Slant Six's Vancouver site, *Operation Raccoon City* has you take a team of four members of Umbrella's Security Service (chosen from six possible characters) into the long, dark night of Leon Kennedy's soul. Our hands-on session begins in Raccoon City Hall during the events of *Resident Evil 2*. The steely blues and mahogany browns of the architecture immediately bring back memories of that game's opening RCPD hours, albeit with a much smoother current-gen gloss. Zombies are behind every door and around every corner, mumbling, stumbling and staggering into the walls – and each other. Even for cannon fodder, Slant Six's undead are dozy – and in the current build appear to come in pairs of like-dressed, same-faced twins. They can be maimed with a vast array of collectable, unlockable and powerful weapons. Feedback

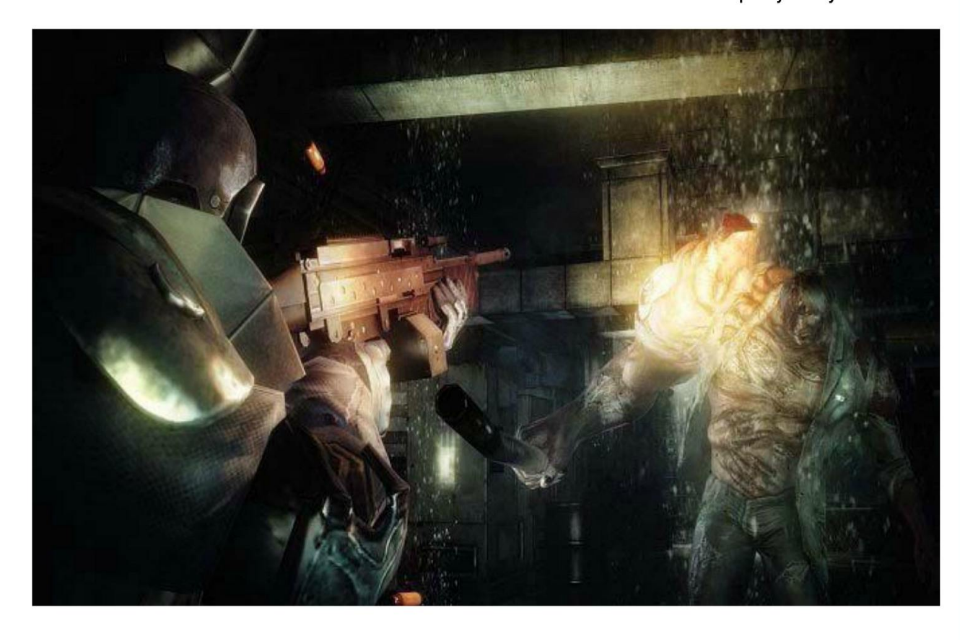


Operation Raccoon City takes place during the events of *Resident Evil 2* and *3*, and Nemesis has already been confirmed in the line-up of threats



RESIDENT EVIL: OPERATION RACCOON CITY

Get shot by a rival special forces trooper and your damage smells like dinner to the infected, who quickly track you down



is much improved over *Confrontation*, and the developer's commitment to realism extends to audio feedback on a level it hasn't achieved before. The rattle of machine-guns is ear-aching and the slicing, dicing of knives on flesh is suitably gruesome. Improved melee is just one feature the developer is bringing to both the *Resident Evil* franchise and its *SOCOM* mould. Holding down L2 initiates an auto-aim that targets the nearest enemies: as your character spins and lunges, firing

The rattle of machine-guns is ear-aching and the slicing of knives on flesh is gruesome

bullets in all directions, the camera pans around to give you the best shot of your shooting. It's a partnering of the cinematic and the user-friendly that heightens the physical personality of each character and side-steps some frustrating camera issues. *Operation Raccoon City*'s camera is a little too close to your character's shoulder for comfort, restricting your view drastically during close-quarters corridor action. It's more forgivable in open spaces, such as when the Lickers turn up as you try to escape City Hall, but when you're taking on the more aggressive and agile foes of the US special forces, your lack of a wide field of vision can be fatal.

While Slant Six's history is evident, the team is certainly not set in its ways. There's a creative streak to the title, in the animations of the Lickers, the use of neon to offset the gloom, and the main characters' outfits, that makes this the most attractive and palatable game the studio has produced in its six-year history. It's also learnt some tricks: there's the mandatory roadie-run, a cover system and an XP unlock ladder that rewards you with character-specific skills after each mission.

Objectives in the campaign – playable co-operatively – currently see you destroying servers and evidence while clearing the environments of walking corpses. Online multiplayer, yet to be revealed, will likely be where Slant Six excels, and it'll be interesting to see what it brings to this competitive market in a post-*Gears Of War 3* age.

The paradox is that *Operation Raccoon City*'s most attractive prospect – the story of humanity's struggle against the undead told from the perspective of the most inhumane hit-squad – is the aspect with which Slant Six is least experienced. A campaign story has never been the team's forte, and while *Operation Raccoon City* looks good and feels focused, there's currently a gaping hole where the narrative heart should be. ■

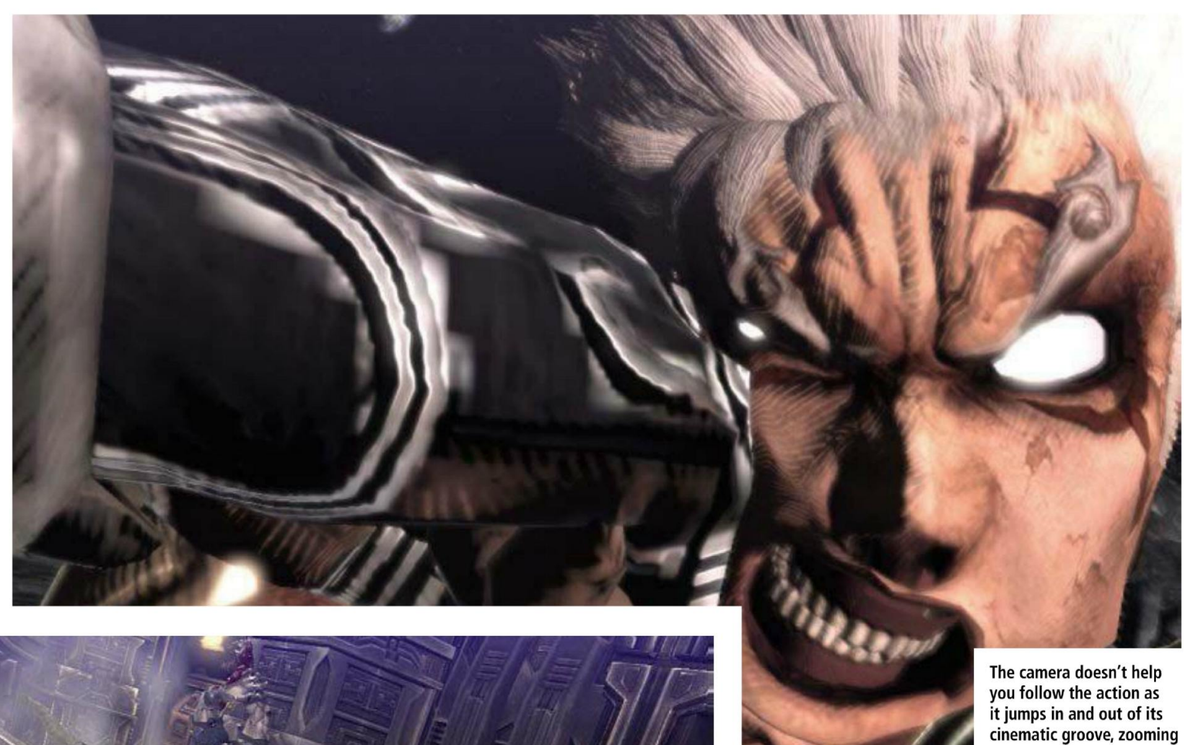
Q&A
Mike Jones
Producer, Capcom



What was it that drew Capcom to Slant Six for this project?
Slant Six put together a fourplayer co-op prototype super-quick. They [are using] proprietary technology – Hexane is their engine; they've developed their own proprietary tech which they're going to be getting licensing for soon. Their engine was sort of based on the *SOCOM* pedigree, so multiplayer, online… They had a very strong online foundation and they put together a prototype that our internal Capcom team in Osaka would have taken half a year to do, and they did it in a month.

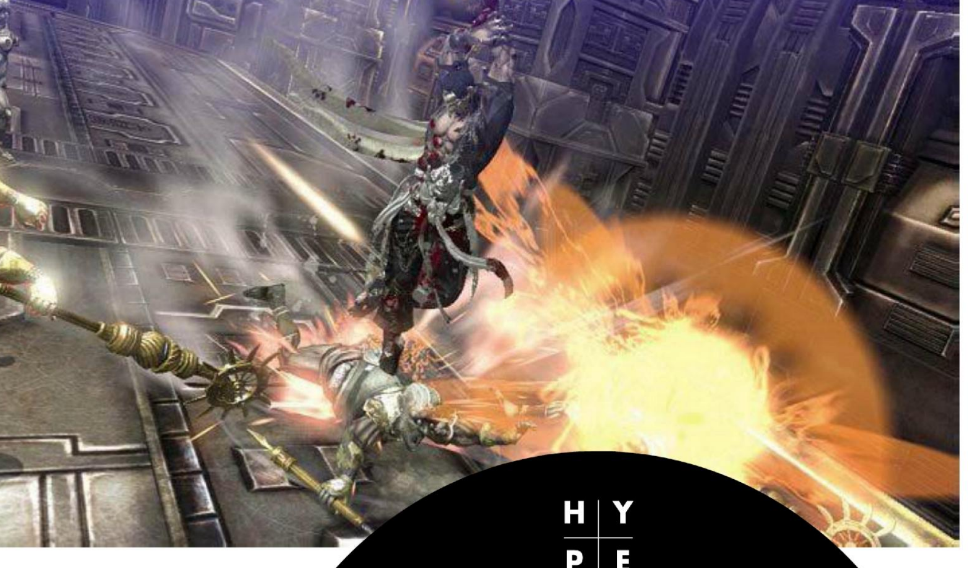
Slant Six's expertise is PS3 multiplayer – is it equipped to deal with this project?
That's a big question, and it's completely valid – we have the same questions at Capcom. We're looking at [Slant Six's *SOCOM: Confrontation*] and it's single-platform, no campaign, no boss creatures, no cinematics, none of that stuff, so it's a huge challenge. So that's one of the things that the Capcom/Slant Six relationship has allowed us to create. Slant Six has the technology, they have the background of the co-op, the multiplayer, the online tech. Capcom owns the franchise – we can help with cinematics and the boss battles, which foreign developers typically have a hard time with. So we've certainly made it a collaborative effort.

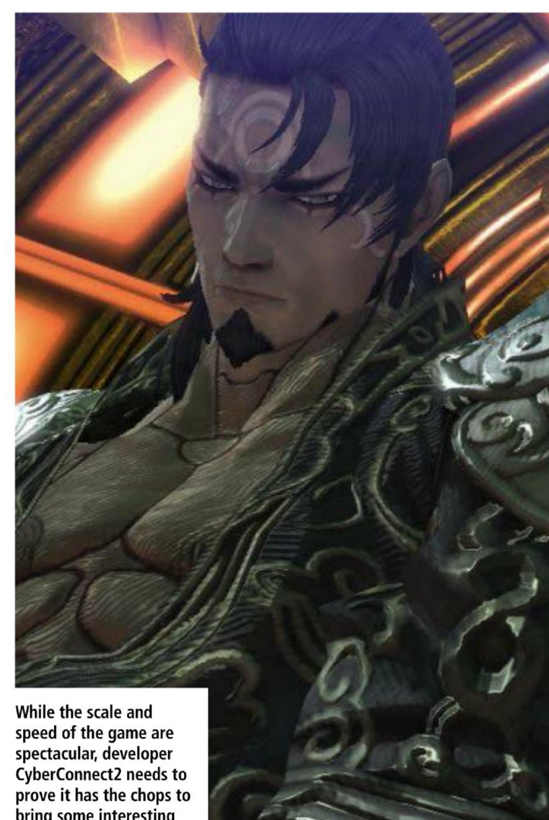
A Capcom question, then: as a publisher you've dabbled with other studios before, and outsourced IP with mixed results. Where has the handling of Capcom IP gone wrong in the past?
This is Slant Six's first time making a 360 game. And if you're not honest about that, and don't say, "OK, this is a big challenge – what are we going to do to make sure that we succeed?" and you just sweep it under the rug, then it's just going to blow up in your face a few months later, and that happens a lot. So we've tried to be super, super honest with each other. It's a big step – it's the first time *Resident Evil* will ever have been developed outside of Japan, so there's a lot riding on it. More than a lot of Japanese companies, Capcom is trying – they're not always succeeding; I mean, *Dark Void* and *Bionic Commando* are good examples – but they're trying to learn how to bridge the gap, more than Sega or a company like that. This is one of the reasons I wanted to work at Capcom. And there's going to be failure that comes with that. You're going to learn from it, you're going to apply [your learning], and you're going to move on. So that's what we're trying to do.



The world of Asura is a mix of mythology and science fiction. In both the fights we try out, the battle extends outside of the Earth's atmosphere

The camera doesn't help you follow the action as it jumps in and out of its cinematic groove, zooming into extreme close-ups during blink-fast QTEs





While the scale and speed of the game are spectacular, developer CyberConnect2 needs to prove it has the chops to bring some interesting characters – rather than caricatures – to the table



H Y
P E

ASURA'S WRATH

The action game mould gets a hundred-hand slap

Publisher	Capcom
Developer	CyberConnect2
Format	360, PS3
Origin	Japan
Release	Q1 2012



www.bit.ly/rvu7xJ
Screenshot gallery

Recent years have seen Capcom step out of its comfort zone, outsourcing its IP (to mixed results) and voyaging, more boldly than any Japanese publisher had before, towards a western audience. Thus far, 2011 has seen the company marching to a similar tune, releasing and iterating *Marvel Vs Capcom 3* and announcing yet another crossover beat 'em up (*Street Fighter X Tekken*) while making more moves on the west with *Dragon's Dogma* (see **E**234) and *Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City* (see p64). Once the daring pioneer of action adventure, Capcom appears to be adjusting the trajectory and reach of its stalwart brands. And then along comes *Asura's Wrath*.

A brazen brawler with the most manic, marauding hero since *God Hand*, *Asura's Wrath* is 100 per cent, unadulterated classic Capcom. Combos run into the thousands (protagonist Asura can spout an additional four arms, which naturally ups the number of flying fists) and your foes are gods that range from the big to the enormous, cackling out awkwardly dubbed one-liners as they pummel you into the dust. It's a surprise, then, to find that this isn't a Capcom-developed game at all; instead, the company looked to CyberConnect2 – known for its *.hack* RPG series and myriad *Naruto* titles. "We approached CyberConnect2 because we saw the games they were coming out with and were actually jealous. We felt at Capcom we weren't able to create games like that," Capcom producer **Kazuhiro Tsuchiya** explains. "That was four years ago. After that, we set up meetings, started talking about ideas and got to the theme of wrath and went from there."

Setting aside the avant-garde style and thematic eccentricity that has hallmarked Capcom's Japan-made properties, the gameplay is a direct descendant of the CyberConnect2 stable. The two sections of the game we get our hands on are arena-based battles fought mostly from an over-shoulder perspective that involve constant aerial manoeuvres and dash attacks as you attempt to fend off the single sinister deity of each world. It plays like *Naruto: Ultimate Ninja Storm* by way of *God Of War*, with frequent quick-time events interrupting the action and punctuating the big showpiece moments. A battle with the god Wyzen is an eye-straining and hyperactive encounter.

QTE button prompts have you hop up towards the city-block-sized rock god and, once finally face to face, a few more timed presses deliver some killer blows. When Wyzen changes tactics you find yourself on the run, charging the sprinting giant down as he traverses the landscape with ease. There's a limited amount of freedom in the grounded sections as you dodge more projectile attacks than you can shake an analogue stick at, and fire back some flurries of your own. When the going gets tough there's so much activity onscreen, from inbound missiles to flaming power meters that grant a special attack once filled, that it's difficult to co-ordinate your own attacks. It's also hard to make out if your hits are connecting, as the screen pulses with balls of energy and explosions.

"We brought CyberConnect2 on board because we were jealous of their games"

That levels are tagged 'episodes' is appropriate – *Asura's Wrath* feels like an interactive anime or your favourite manga series brought to life. There are shades of Fist Of The North Star in the story of a man and his mission for muscular vengeance, and in the direction of the nose-smashing action there are elements of Park Joong-Ki's seminal action manhwa Shaman Warrior.

Rather than alienate, the cross-cutting of cinematic scenes engages players, lending the fisticuffs some dramatic tension (however slight) as characters exchange words and beat their chests. You get swept up in the chaos of Asura's world and are so distracted by the spectacle you temporarily cease to care about some of the horrible science of the gameplay.

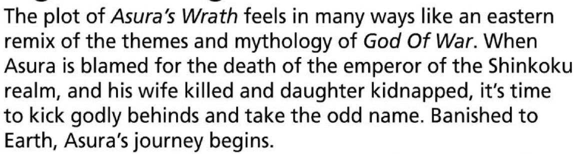
The world itself is where there are hints of a David Jaffe influence. Wyzen's stomping ground has seemingly been plucked from *God Of War*'s cutting-room floor, all mud browns and hellfire reds. The similarities end there, though, as *Asura's Wrath* is – on this showing – a one-on-one fighter with neither the time nor patience to pander to a rich mythology or anything as silly as a character arc. The second episode we try out pits us against a god more our own size. Augus is an athletic piece of manga meat who looks like the lovechild of *Street Fighter*'s Akuma and Arnold Schwarzenegger. There are markedly fewer QTEs in this battle, which takes place on the Moon, and attention must be paid to Augus' grabs and special attacks. There's a more nimble kinetic feel to this fight that changes the game's flow – it's all about counter-attacks and building up specials to unleash at the right time.

Asura's Wrath's verve and enthusiasm is infectious but it may also be its undoing. Where CyberConnect2 previously had a built-in audience – and set of narrative rules – for its *Naruto* titles, this original IP has no restraints imposed by a popular, accomplished source material, and thus nothing to keep it in check. The writers and directors of the game have been let loose, seemingly, to do as they please. If *Asura's Wrath* is proof of anything, it's not that Capcom is going back to its roots, it's that CyberConnect2 has the technology and confidence to bridge the gap between manga, anime and videogames. ■





Against all gods



The plot of *Asura's Wrath* feels in many ways like an eastern remix of the themes and mythology of *God Of War*. When Asura is blamed for the death of the emperor of the Shinkoku realm, and his wife killed and daughter kidnapped, it's time to kick godly behinds and take the odd name. Banished to Earth, Asura's journey begins.

Though touted as an interactive story, the strength of CyberConnect2's yarn-spinning is yet to be proved here. If it can flesh out its characters successfully, this could be a rip-roaring rampage of revenge worth embarking on.

H | Y
P | E



SNIPER ELITE V2

A returning warrior with Generation Killstreak in its sights

Publisher	505 Games
Developer	Rebellion
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	UK
Release	2012





The game takes place in the ashes of WWII, and focuses on the build-up to the Cold War. The plot, featuring scientists and V2 rockets, will place Germans and Soviets in Fairburne's sights

It isn't all long-distance risk-taking: you come equipped with a silenced pistol and a machine-gun for when things turn sour. Rebellion promises that the hardcore edge has not been lost, so being caught out in the open will often result in death



Gameplay is centred on 'the sniper's choice' – the dilemma of whether to take your shot, wait until your prey has moved somewhere a little more lonely, or maybe to stay quiet and sneak past

The subtle art of sniping is big business nowadays. A casual stride through the wilderness of either *Call Of Duty* or *Battlefield* will invariably be rewarded by a distant pop and a facial entry wound. In the real world, meanwhile, decent sales of games such as the markedly poor *Sniper Ghost Warrior* have proved that scopes can sell. Witness, then, *Sniper Elite V2* emerging from the long grass – Rebellion's belated sequel to its well-received, and lovably hardcore, 2005 WWII long-distance shooter.

Sniper Elite V2 retreads the same mortar-pocked ground as the original, with hawk-eyed hero Karl Fairburne sneaking on his lonesome through the rubble of 1945 Berlin. His mission takes place at the end of one brutal war and acts as a precedent to the colder one ahead, and as such both Nazis and Soviets find themselves under his crosshairs as he headshots his way to destroying a secret stash of V2 rockets.

The first and foremost observation to make about *Sniper Elite V2* is that it's an extraordinarily gruesome game. Well-placed shots result in slow-motion bullet-cam forays that result in dynamic X-rays of bodies being pierced: hearts burst, eyeballs bulge, teeth crack, skulls fragment and tendons snap. In every case the dented bullet emerges, almost apologetically, from the other side of the deceased – but many players will miss this moment while comforting distressed family members who've walked into the room at exactly the wrong moment.

Do gratuitous *Mortal Kombat*-style internal shots belong in serious WWII drama or, as Rebellion underlines, do they instead make you consider exactly what impact your bullets make on the human form? The debate first raised by the action-cam death shots in *Brothers In Arms: Hell's Highway* will almost certainly find itself reignited.

The true pleasures of the game, meanwhile, clearly come with the build-up to and fallout from a well-taken sniper shot. On the first shot your prey will be startled, leaping behind the nearest cover, as yet unaware of where the shot came from. On the second they'll all begin to piece together your location – flanking and covering their way towards your nest. When they get too close for comfort, you move in thirdperson equipped with a silenced pistol and a machine-gun. The explosion of blood and brain fluid when you secure a kill with the former is, again, rather messy.

Away from the buckets of gore, a notably modern take on stealth has also been built atop the foundations of *Sniper Elite*. There's an emphasis on more physical silent takedowns, with your Sam Fisher-esque 'last known location' silhouettes and a coloured meter showing your foes' awareness of your position. This, coupled with an aim assist, may cause established fans of the original to worry that *Sniper Elite*'s identity has been compromised in pursuit of a wider audience. Rebellion, however, insists that attempts to open up the game won't affect the hardcore nature of more intense difficulty modes.

Given the omnipresence of modern warfare in gaming, WWII is now a less-crowded gaming space than it once was – and as *Red Orchestra* on PC has demonstrated, it's an arena where authenticity can prosper. The challenge for Rebellion will come when convincing the *Sniper Elite* home guard that the former steel-hearted approach is uncompromised while shoulder blades are broken in two, fingers are blasted off, and the smouldering walls of Berlin are liberally doused in vintage claret.



Back in action

After critical disasters such as *Shellshock 2: Blood Trails* and *Rogue Warrior*, the likes of *AVP*, *Sniper Elite V2* and *Neverdead* are out to raise Rebellion's stock with gamers. "It's now a deliberate policy to move away from making games that might have been good for business, but not necessarily for reputation," explains **Jason Kingsley**, Rebellion's CEO and creative director. "You're only as good as the deal you're offered. If someone says, 'Can you make me a game in nine months?' then the answer is, 'Probably. But it won't be as good as a game where we've had creative input and the time to mature the idea'."

While James Heller (*Prototype 2*'s new anti-hero) has plenty of abilities, there's nothing stopping him from picking up a simple rocket launcher and using it against his attackers. It may lack creativity, but it gets the job done



BELOW **Enemies come at you with some fierce weapons. If you're outnumbered, Heller can activate his shield not only to block attacks but also reflect them back at his assailant**





H | Y
P | E



PROTOTYPE 2

Elbow-dropping tanks with Radical's explosive open-world actioner

Publisher	Activision
Developer	Radical Entertainment
Format	360, PC, PS3
Origin	US
Release	April 24

New York Zero is not exactly an ideal vacation spot (what with the monsters, totalitarian military and, man, the traffic) but for seeing the sights, the rooftops remain your best bet



www.bit.ly/tvmd0f
Screenshot gallery

Players can speed their travel around the city by gliding. It's especially useful (and devastating) for getting the drop on a target from above

Taking on the role of a protagonist can be an intimate experience. You see life from their eyes, understand problems from their point of view. But sometimes that protagonist is not quite who they claim to be, and the results of your actions aren't quite what you intended. If you played the first *Prototype*, you've already fallen for unreliable narrator Alex Mercer's ruse. *Prototype 2* is your chance to return to New York City to get some revenge.

Dave Fracchia, studio vice president of Radical Entertainment, takes a moment to describe to us a sample scene in *Prototype 2*. "I can pick up a car", he explains, "run up to the top of a skyscraper with it, throw it at a helicopter, jump on to another helicopter, rip its weapon system off... as I'm falling, I can use the weapon system to take out that helicopter before elbow-dropping a tank."

By the end of the description, his pupils have dilated and a light sheen of perspiration has formed on his forehead. The speech doesn't feel rehearsed, and it reflects the breadth of abilities that makes *Prototype 2* stand out.

Playing a three-minute demo (with no objective other than to cause as much carnage as possible), the number of options available to the player is almost overwhelming, with combat options emerging at a staggering pace. A simple enemy APC can be demolished in half-a-dozen ways ranging from the simple (pick up a rocket launcher and go to town) to the exotic (use tendrils to turn it into a gravity well for all nearby debris) to the unnecessarily expensive (hijack a nearby helicopter and crash it straight into the APC).

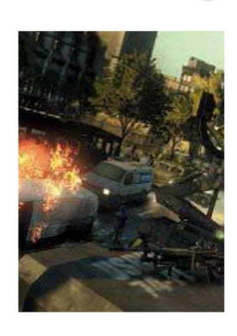
Many of these options appeared in the first *Prototype*, but everything feels more refined this time around, with the stealthier combat options in particular having been upgraded. "Now, if you're doing stealth [kills], you have to see if your targets are being watched or not," Fracchia explains. "Then you have to take out the guys that are watching those targets, so it becomes a great puzzle-based game."

Another big change for the sequel is the addition of a new protagonist, a US army sergeant named James Heller. After it is revealed that the game's first protagonist, Alex Mercer, caused the outbreak which eventually killed Heller's family, *Prototype 2* becomes a quest for revenge. One of the biggest differences between Heller and Mercer is the former's ability to customise his powers, discovering upgrades from hives scattered throughout the city. The first game offered some customisation, but *Prototype 2* will offer more options in terms of powers and abilities, with players choosing between claws, blades and hammer attacks.

Radical has also been receptive to criticism of the first game. "We spent the first month or two in this game really looking at all of the critical reviews," Fracchia says. "We looked at user blogs, we went through Twitter, we went through our own internal post-mortem, Activision did a post-mortem, and it was all focused on what we need to do to improve."

According to Fracchia, difficulty was a big issue, with many users finding the first game frustrating. Mission repetition has also been worked on, and the story should be easier to follow this time around.

Though public and private play sessions have been too brief to see whether these adjustments have been made, it's clear that these developers know where their core strengths lie. Put simply, *Prototype 2* is the only game on the horizon which lets you elbow-drop a tank. ■





Hero to zero

Prototype 2 is set in an alternate version of NYC called New York Zero. With the city ravaged by the virus from the first game, the government has split it into thirds, in an attempt to keep the situation contained. The Green Zone is an area under complete military lockdown, where any resistance will be fiercely crushed. The Yellow Zone has been set aside for refugees, and is filled with shanty towns, resistance fighters and hippies. The Red Zone, however, is fully infected. You'll need a full set of jabs before entering, and even then, a tank wouldn't be bad idea.

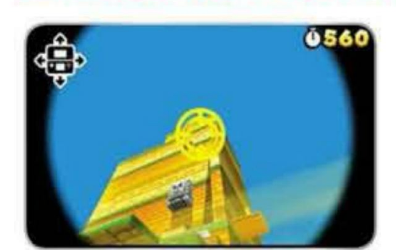
Mario is

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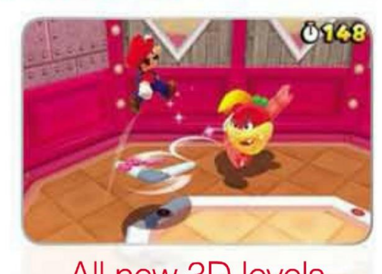
"Fuses 2D and 3D influences to feel fresher than any handheld Mario in years"
Edge

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All new 3D levels

Both new and experienced players will find something to love in *Super Mario 3D Land*.



Tanooki Mario is back!

Whack enemies with your tail and make jumping easier with this classic power-up!







BRAVE NEW WORLD

With its head in the clouds, Irrational Games is rewriting the history of the American Century with BioShock Infinite

Publisher 2K Games
Developer Irrational Games
Format 360, PC, PS3
Release 2012

ideogames love a dystopia but rarely try to understand it. In particular, games tend to ignore the fact that nobody actually sets out to create the most awful society imaginable. They set out to create something perfect. And then things start to go wrong.

That miserable gap between ambition and reality is what made *BioShock*'s Rapture such a rich environment to explore. The filigreed diving bells, child slavery and lumbering brass-plated horrors provided a few smart surprises, but at the heart of the experience was a man being eaten up by the embodiment – and the consequences – of his own beliefs. "It's sort of the big tragedy of history," muses Irrational Games' creative director, **Ken Levine**, explaining the threads uniting Rapture and Columbia, the sky-minded city in the clouds that provides the setting for the studio's new game, *BioShock Infinite*. "I love to look at an idea and see what happens if the idea becomes more important than the reality." From Levine's perspective, loss may lie at the heart of most fears, yet it's an inability to let go that fuels the worst of all evils.

So it's ideas – specifically their dangerous power to both fascinate and simplify – that define *Infinite*. From the toxic exceptionalism that gripped America at the turn of the 20th century to Levine's own belief in telling complex stories in a way that doesn't remove player agency, you can feel the restless weight of thought behind the game's floating metropolis. But we'll come back to that later. The first ideas Levine had to deal with when creating a follow-up to *BioShock* weren't his own: they were other people's notions regarding exactly what a follow-up to the critically applauded *BioShock* should be.

"NONE OF US COULD GET EXCITED ABOUT GOING BACK TO RAPTURE"

"It took us about six months to settle on *Infinite*, and we even prototyped another game in that time period," Levine says. "We weren't feeling it. Then we had this meeting where we thought, 'If we were to do another *BioShock*, what should that mean?' None of us could get excited about going back to Rapture. As a studio, we felt we'd said what we had to say about that story, at least for the time being.

"What excited us about *Infinite* was: what if were to throw away all the things that made us comfortable? Things like the city and the setting and the things that were probably the most successful elements of the first game. Those were exactly the things we thought people had come to be familiar with, in a way that was counter to the notion we wanted to generate. Familiarity in Rapture, you know? Not a good thing."

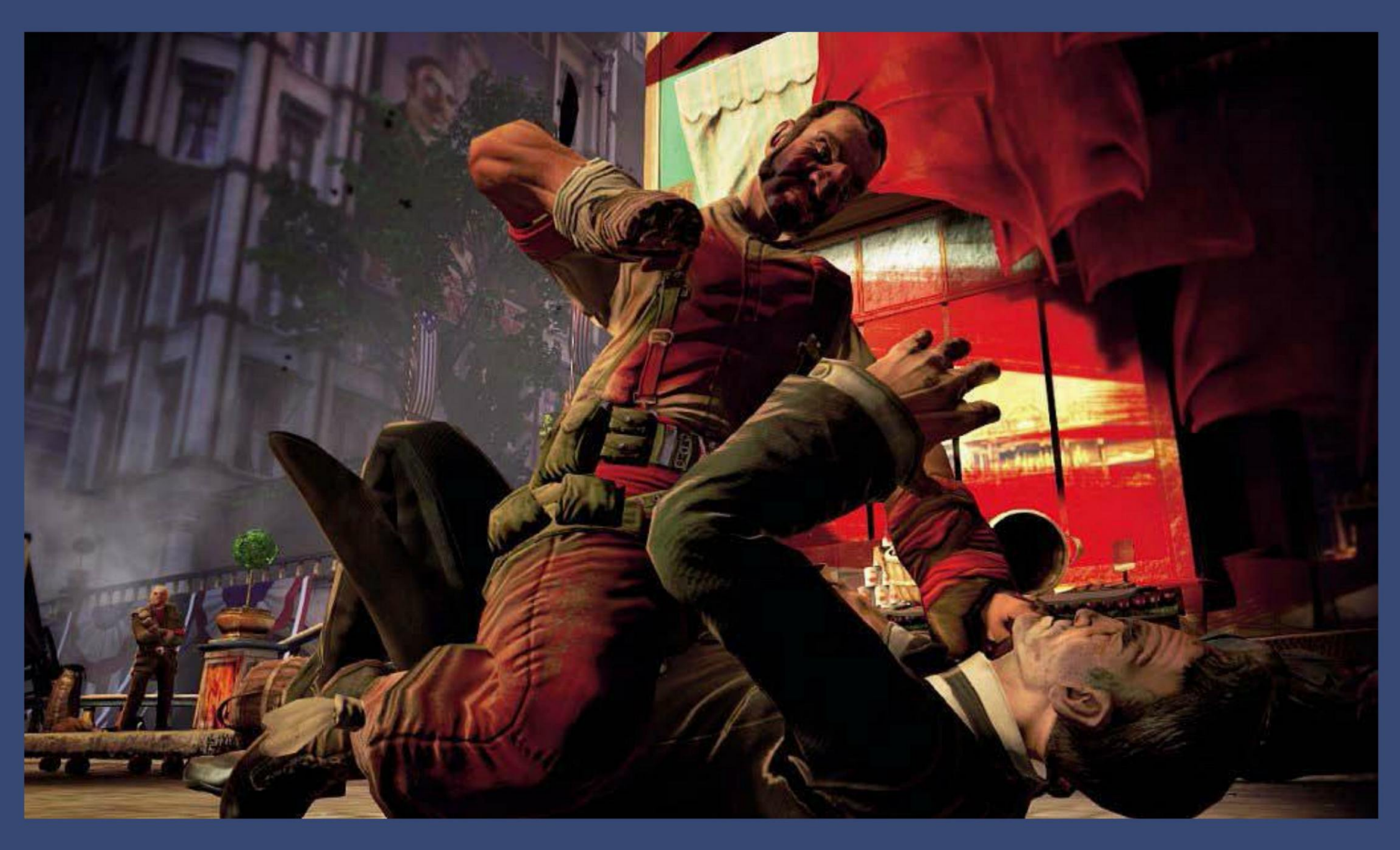
Infinite's not really a sequel, then. It's a reappraisal of the *BioShock* template – a testing of the rules. Columbia's a warship disguised as a floating World's Fair. Heralding the emergence of America as a major player on the global stage, it has been missing since it fired on Chinese ships during the Boxer Rebellion. Its lofty 19th century inspirations couldn't be further removed from the paranoid '50s individualism that



SONGS OF INNOCENCE

Songbird's brief cameo appearances dominate any *Infinite* footage in which it appears. Part guardian, part searchlight, part jealous lover, it's terrifying in scale and disturbingly intimate in its relationship with Elizabeth. The shattered glass of one eye and the leather-clad bellows of its neck may do a lot to give the character its unusually forceful presence, but what's really frightening is that Levine admits the character is inspired by real-life tales of spousal abuse. With its princesses in towers and cloud-covered fairytale spires, Columbia's just the kind of land you might find at the top of a beanstalk. Songbird makes for an unforgettable giant.





***Infinite* requires the team to create a world perched at the edge of anarchy, where any situation could tip things over into convincing chaos. It's a big ask, particularly when so many games still have trouble making shoulders that look right**

warped Andrew Ryan's dark metropolis, just as its bright courtyards nestling among the clouds are the absolute opposite of the sunken city's narrow, waterlogged corridors. The narrative echoes the wider reversals, too. You haven't washed up in hell by apparent accident this time. You've come of your own accord, in the role of Booker DeWitt, a disgraced Pinkerton agent paid to track down a mysterious girl named Elizabeth and steal her away from her guardian, a huge, jealous automaton named Songbird.

Columbia required more than a simple inversion of Rapture to take flight, though. "We had the floating city and the time period right away," Levine says. "What we didn't have was the conflict, the characters and the look. For a long time, it was just sky instead of oceans. The story was about a fight between a group of technologists and a group of technophobes." He laughs. "We were struggling to make it interesting."

Interesting or not, Levine and his team had already set their sights on one of the pivotal moments in American history. "I think the reason why there are so many actual artistic visions of a city in the sky at the start of the 20th century is because so much had changed in the last 20 years," he suggests. "You look back over the last 20 years here, the only big new technology has been the Internet. You go back then and look at that 20-year period, you've got electricity, telephones, airplanes, automobiles, movies, phonograph records. People's heads are spinning. They probably think technological change is going to continue at that pace."

Possible, but not necessarily engrossing. *Infinite*'s final crucial ingredient only arrived after Levine watched the television documentary America 1900. "That's the point where I realised I didn't have a good understanding of the dynamics that were at play at that time," he admits. "There are actually two dynamics: not just the dynamic of technology, but of 'what is the role of America in the world?'

"Technology and America's role were both things that people felt a huge amount of optimism about, but they were bookended by things that eventually became very, very dark. With technology it was the First World War, where that expertise was turned against

MISSION POSSIBLE

BioShock's more jarring moments weren't when the fantasy gave way, but when the game's mission structure failed to live up to that fantasy, sending you on fetch quests when you'd much rather be exploring. Levine admits that the team's now always searching for mechanics that match environment and theme. "And we're searching with varying degrees of success," he adds."If you look at *BioShock*, some of the quests are not great, I concede that. The best moment is Sander Cohen sending you to murder his disciples and turn them into a piece of art. We hold that up as an example of the best work we've done internally. When we're coming up with a new quest, we compare it against that."

people. And then with America, as it was finding its footing in the world, it also got involved in situations in places like the Philippines, which it essentially made a colony of the US." Levine finally settled on a single organising idea from which everything could emerge: 'July 4, 1912'. "Independence Day, not how it actually was, but how people thought it was," he enthuses. "That was it. As soon as we had that, all of our artists said, 'OK, now I actually get this.' That's when everything started really accelerating on the project."

Suddenly, Columbia had rich internal divisions to match its dazzling exteriors. It had the Vox Populi, a revolutionary workers' group, pitted against the ultranationalist Founders. The Founders created Columbia and now seek to keep it afloat and racially 'pure'. Vox wants to bring the city down. Both have held their viewpoints for so long that they've deteriorated into dogma. Both see the mysterious Elizabeth as the key to victory.

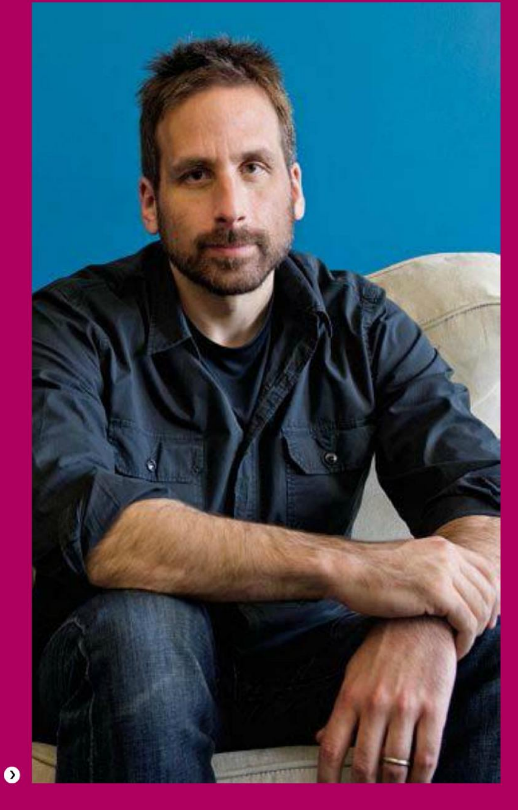
It's a battle that Booker finds himself in the middle of. "In a lot of ways, *Infinite*'s going to feel like the better levels of *BioShock 1*," Levine explains. "I don't want people to think this is an open world, because it isn't, but it's hubs and spokes on a much larger scale than before. There's a huge amount of verticality, there's a lot of exploration, a lot of very large outdoor spaces, and then very traditional *BioShock*-style interiors."

"WE COULD SCREW UP. WE'RE INTO UNEXPLORED TERRITORY"

Combat will still be at the heart of the experience, with guns and a range of vigors, which stand in for plasmids, allowing players to conjure flocks of crows or blast enemies into the air. It's the old one-two again, but with a little more room for experimentation. "In the first game, when all you have is nails, everything looks like a hammer," Levine laughs. "Shotgun and Electrobolt tend to be your go-to weapons in every situation. One of the reasons we have these wide-open spaces now is we want to give you reasons to use different tools. You had crowd-control plasmids in *BioShock* but you never had crowds. You had long-range weapons but you never had long ranges. We want to maintain *BioShock* combat but we also want to refine it."

There's a big difference to *Infinite*, however, and it comes down to timing. "In *BioShock 1* you arrive literally after the party, after the New Year's Eve celebrations that set everything off," Levine notes. "You're an archaeologist, picking through the wreckage. In *Infinite*, you and Elizabeth are catalysts; you're much more central to the story. The conflict between the Founders and Vox Populi has barely even started: freeing Elizabeth from captivity really sets things in motion." He laughs again. "In *BioShock* and *System Shock 2* there was something about the form that really implied a world in amber. At some point we decided that was a function of technology and development time rather than a rule of a *BioShock* game. So we took a risk, and whenever you take a risk you always have the possibility of really screwing up. We're into a lot of unexplored territory."

Watching an Irrational staffer guide Booker through the heart of the city, that risk seems to have been worth taking. The studio has captured brilliantly the surreal dual nature of an urban environment approaching breaking point. On the surface, Columbia still has the

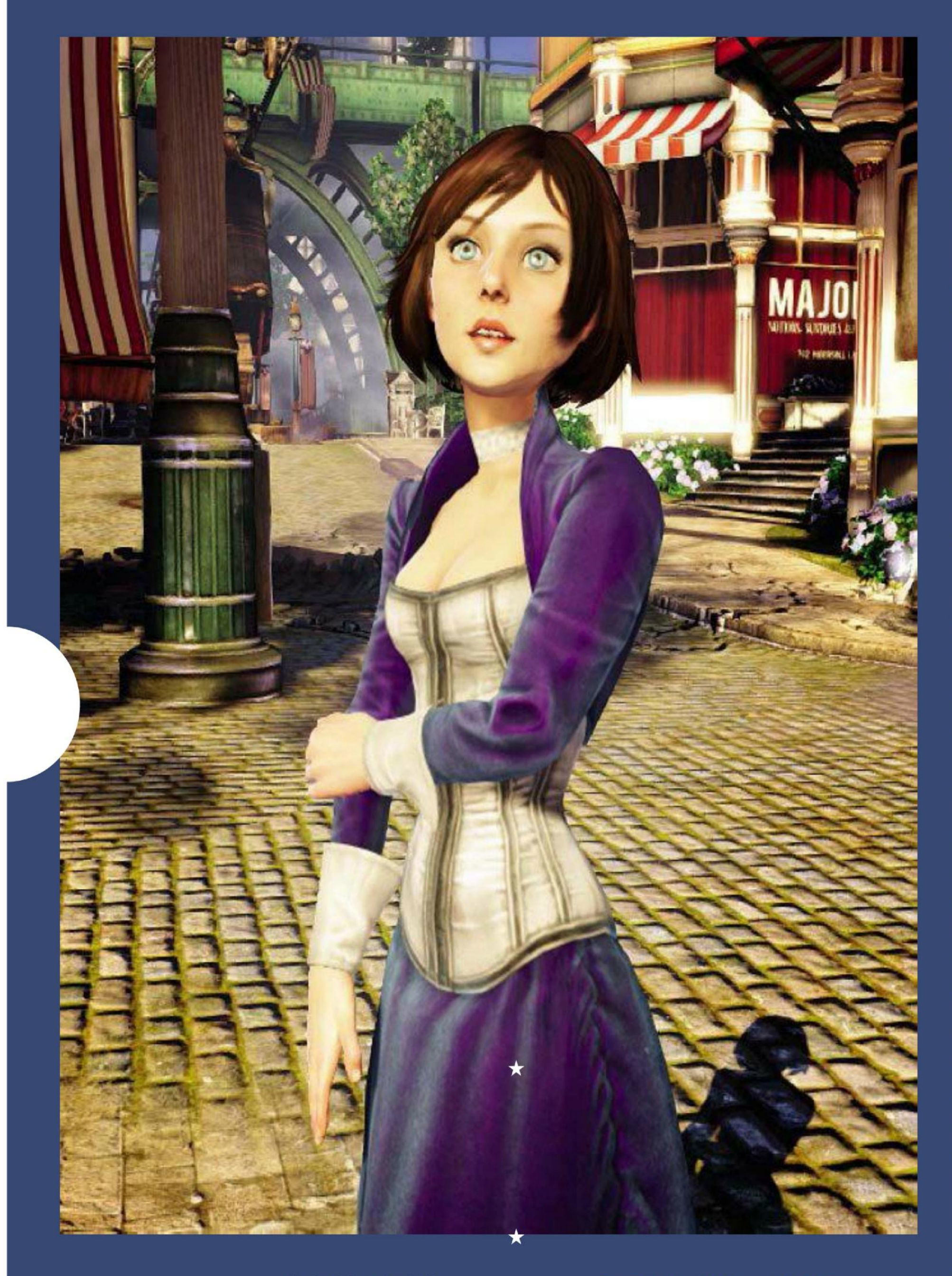


RIGHT **Ken Levine, creative director and co-founder of Irrational Games**



TACTICAL RIFTS

Infinite's E3 demo sees Elizabeth's powers briefly transporting the audience to a 1980s street scene where a cinema is playing 'Revenge Of The Jedi'. It's a disarming moment, and it's built with assets from the cancelled game Irrational prototyped after the first *BioShock*. "It was ideal, because we had the idea for a scene but we didn't have the time to make the assets, so that was a great bit of synchronicity. But in every game you're always picking up little bits of ideas that you had and tossed away or that have evolved. There are probably bits and pieces of *BioShock 1* that we didn't get to that will appear here in some form. Games are definitely much more porous than you might think."



Elizabeth in Columbia's Main Street USA, with all of the contrivances that suggests. Like Rapture, it's a manifesto you walk through, and it should be fascinating to dig around in

BEHIND THE JAUNTY PAINT, YOU CAN SEE THE FAÇADE BEGINNING TO SHATTER

breezy, bunting-clad look of a 19th century state fair, of an insular clapboard America revelling in hot dogs and ball games while Europe grinds towards the trenches. But beyond the topiary shrubs and the jaunty patriotic sprays of red, white and blue paint, you can see the façade beginning to shatter. Perky advertising hoardings compete for the skyline with crimson graffiti spelling out CAPITALIST and TYRANT, while Vox Populi mobs are starting to appear in doorways, intimidating passers-by and even setting up kangaroo courts in the street.

It's a gripping place to explore, but can Irrational really deliver a city perched, unpredictably, on the edge of a riot? In *BioShock*, with the player safely stuck in that archaeologist role, Levine's team could have total control over the game's pace and staging. That's not the case any more: being at the centre of the action implies more volatility – and more agency.

Levine admits that *Infinite*'s story would be easier to tell if the team could rely on cutscenes, a tool they've decided to avoid as much as possible. Isn't the danger, though, that in removing such interruptions, Irrational has to then control the moment-by-moment action far more restrictively, ensuring wayward players don't miss anything? "We know a bunch of tricks," Levine asserts. "There are a lot of ways to draw people's eyes to things, a lot of ways to give the player either a literal or a figurative nudge in the right direction. But we try to never take control away from the player unless there's a context for them losing control. It's been our challenge to keep the player with access to his full toolset as often as you can. The more you limit that, the more it becomes a designer-focused experience. It's about how much story you want to tell, and story and agency sometimes fight each other. That's our fight. And to quote The Big Lebowski, sometimes you eat the bear, and sometimes the bear eats you."

Central to Irrational's ambitions to free players from typical narrative crutches is Elizabeth, who's not just an AI companion but a major force in both *Infinite*'s action and its human drama. In tightly controlled demos of the game you can see her potential as she fools around with a Lincoln mask in an abandoned store, takes cover during firefights and, in the E3 build's finest moment,



LEADING MEN

Asked to compare *Infinite*'s approach to that of another story-based series, Naughty Dog's *Uncharted*, Levine is typically thoughtful. "The parts I found most inspirational were just the dialogue and the goofing around as Drake and his sidekicks are walking through the world," he says. "What I love about the characters in that game is that they aren't always on the clock. They have lives outside of what the plot is. That's always been a problem with games: characters are just there for the plot and they don't have seem to exist outside of that. Naughty Dog brought that to games, and they also brought a trust of actors to games, which I've been inspired by. I've put a huge amount of trust in actors in our game."

implores her rescuer to kill her rather than let Songbird take her back, grabbing Booker's hand and tightening it around her slender throat. It's powerful stuff, and even throughout the more hectic action there's a sense they are genuinely conversing rather than merely trading audio files. *Infinite* could be the first singleplayer videogame built around a dialogue.

Can the team carry this kind of staging across to the full game? "In the demo we know Elizabeth is always going to say this here, and that over there," sighs Levine. "In the [live] game, we don't have that benefit. What if the player's not looking? What if they're running into the next environment? What if he doesn't go to a certain part of the environment to trigger something?"

The answer the developer has hit on – for both Elizabeth and Columbia's other citizenry out in the street, waiting for the best moment to plant a kiss, mug a stranger or start a fight – is systemic AI: constantly monitoring the player's actions and making judgements. "Elizabeth may have a handful of things to do in each location," Levine explains. "So she's always thinking, 'OK, is this a good time to do this bit of business? No, it's not. Well, let me try to do it later in the level.' We see each level as an opportunity for her to do different things, and she has to adapt to that, negotiating with other AIs and with what the player's doing. We have a very complicated rule-set so we don't just have these [preordained] moments that are happening at the same time for everybody. We have to assume that the player's not going to be a very co-operative team partner."

Levine is aware that Elizabeth poses more than mere technical conundrums, too. "The biggest challenge," he explains, "is what is Elizabeth doing when you're just standing around? The moment that you look over at Elizabeth and she looks like a mannequin, it's over – we've lost that battle for the player investing in her. No matter how well or not I write that character, or how well the actress performs her lines, if you look over and you catch her being a mannequin, you can't win that fight.

"So Chris Kline, our director of technology, and his whole team of artists, designers and programmers, they're basically Team Elizabeth. They've spent a lot of their

Elizabeth lies at the very centre of the game, as the mysterious power that may be keeping Columbia moving. For Levine and his team, she's a battle they can't lose

time saying, 'OK, what do people do when they're just standing around?' I told Chris and the team to just go home and look at their wives when they aren't watching, and see what they do. It's an art form, figuring that stuff out. It's critical. It sounds small, but it's actually incredibly important."

Blurring the line between NPC and genuine ally, Elizabeth also bears the responsibility for making *Infinite*'s more fantastical elements convincing. If a floating city isn't enough, Levine's game also hinges on interdimensional tears in the fabric of space-time – gaps in reality that Elizabeth can exploit. "It's always very challenging whenever you bring in things like this," Levine says. "We're trying to tell a story that's grounded in real social issues. Deep down, *BioShock 1* is about economic theory. That's a pretty dry topic. Could you have a game about economic theory and elves? Maybe, but you're sort of fighting against yourself.

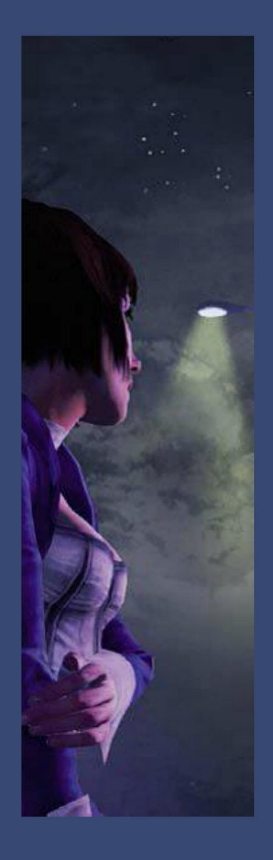
"But then, we're making a videogame. There's got to be cool things to do. You have to make something that feels whole. With *BioShock 1*, [influential author Ayn] Rand was writing about the superman – the ideal individual. The idea of people being able to improve themselves became a very natural science-fiction component of that. There's at least a whiff of science to what we did. I'm not saying you'll be injecting yourself with potions and be able to shoot bees out of your hand, but there's a whiff of it. They have to be the same story. Without this there is no story – Elizabeth is just some girl and Booker has no reason to be there."

"WE'RE TRYING TO TELL A STORY THAT'S GROUNDED IN REAL ISSUES"

Elizabeth's powers may save her from being trapped within an endless escort mission, but there's a danger they could turn her into a combat upgrade instead, given her ability to call in cover or weaponry during battles. It's something Levine is confident that the team has in check. "We are very careful to wed what's going on in the narrative and what's going on with her powers in the game. In the demo, we introduce the tears in a scene where Elizabeth's trying to save a dying horse. First, you have a narrative introduction, and then the combat bit later, and she's using the same mechanic to change the combat space. Those two moments had to be the same thing. If she had two different powers – 'Hey! I'm the power for the story' and 'I'm the power for the game' – it would have felt tacked on."

Levine is also insistent that Elizabeth's powers should come at a personal price, thereby encouraging respect. "Whenever you use her powers in the game, you're always aware that these powers are her curse," he says. "They're the reason her whole life has been taken away from her. There's so much pain and so much power, these things have to be centrally tied. It's like in *BioShock 1*, where we found ways to tie the character growth system to the Little Sisters, because they had Adam on them. For a long time in the game we didn't have Adam, so the Little Sisters just dropped money. We realised that unless they dropped something exclusive and central to your character, you'd never take on the Big Daddies, because they were badass. That problem caused us to unite the two elements more strongly. In design I think sometimes your worst enemies are your best friends."

Friends and enemies, massive cities and world-changing powers,





LINK TO THE PAST

Infinite may be set in 1912 but it doesn't shy away from contemporary issues, whether it's Vox Populi blending with Occupy Wall Street protestors, or the way that Booker's background as a Pinkerton man casts light on the role private military companies now play in geopolitics.

"When we first launched the game, the first thing we showed were the Founders," Levine explains." And people said, 'Well, you're just trying to have a laugh at the Tea Party's expense'. I know people within my family who feel very strongly about the Tea Party and were very upset with me when they first saw it. In the press, people assumed that was the goal, but it wasn't. We actually started this before there was a Tea Party. The Tea Party's not the newest thing under the sun. There have been many movements like that over the years. That's the point.

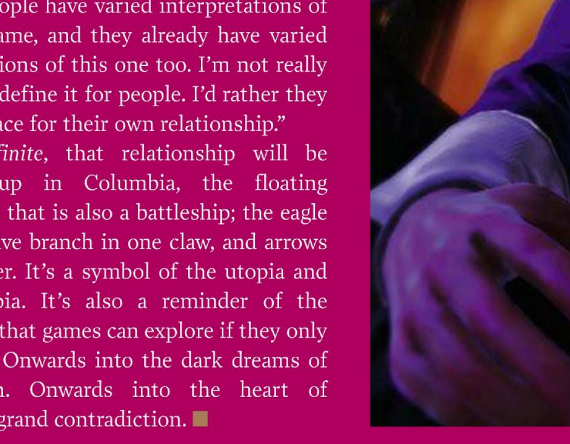
"We were able to show the Vox Populi before Occupy Wall Street happened, so I think people are starting to understand now. When you look to the past you tend to see these cycles of movements that come and go. So what you're seeing with The Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street is nothing new. It's something you see over and over again. We saw it in 1900 when you had the election between Bryant and McKinley. That was very much a view of the world divided along what people's vision of America was – an internationalist workers' home on one side or a very nationalist America First view on the other."

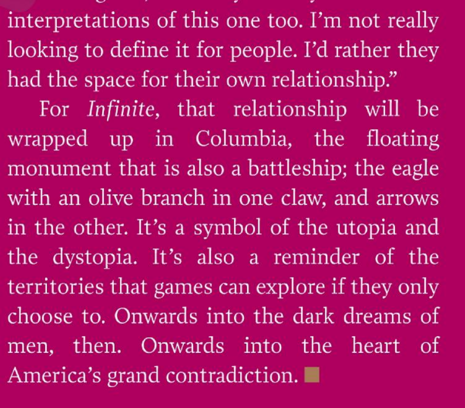


ABOVE **Columbia is as full of unexpected flights of steampunk fancy as you might expect. Many of its stranger ideas have roots in reality, though, and the human drama is kept in the foreground throughout.** RIGHT **Elizabeth is a fascinating blend of strengths and weaknesses. She looks to Booker for guidance, but is handy in a fight – and she understands the strange rules that govern Columbia far better than her would-be rescuer**

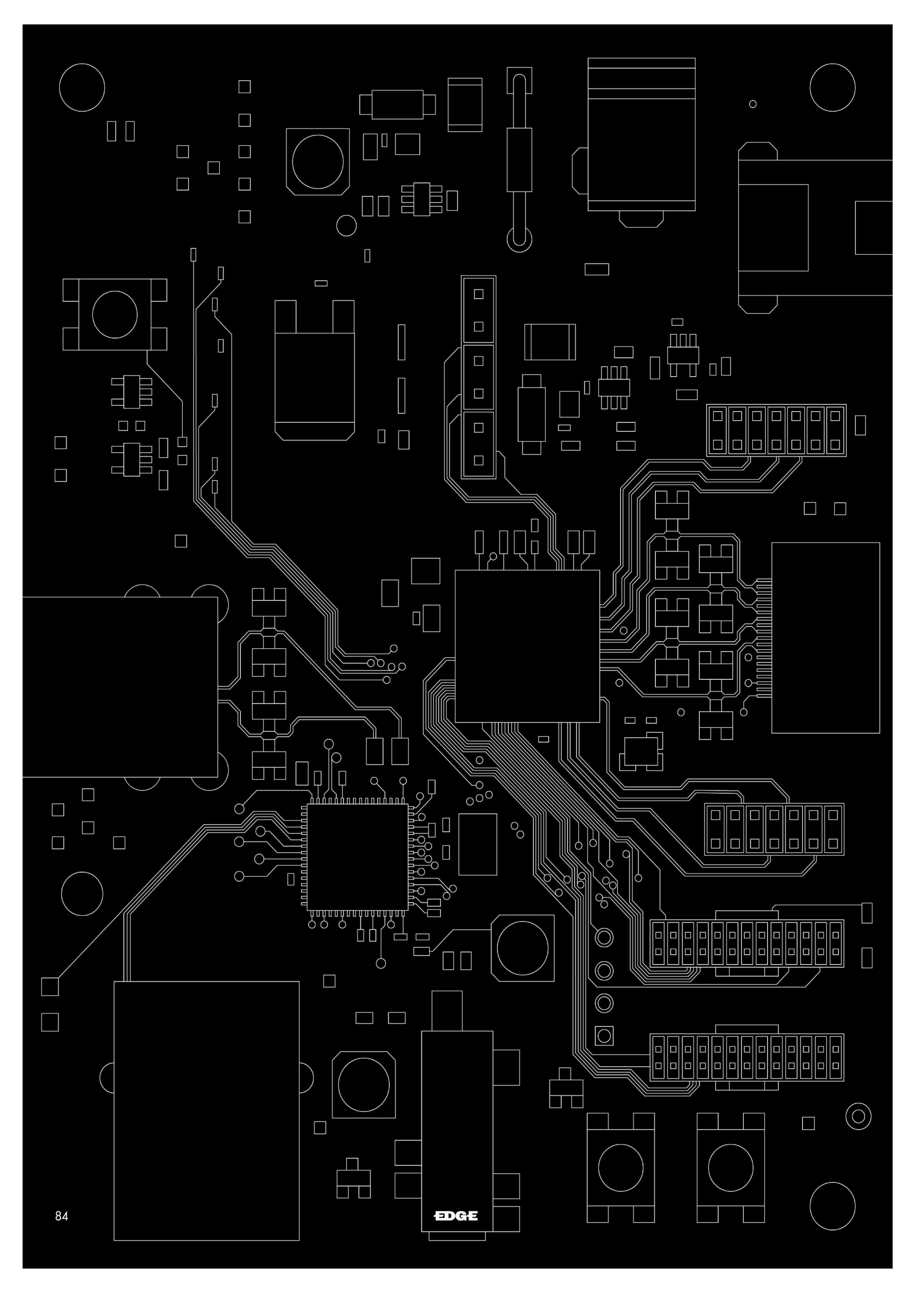
negotiating AI and a constant interplay of science, fantasy, game design and sociology: *BioShock Infinite* is the very definition of a magnificent undertaking. It's a work that, in its own way, is befitting of the aggressive optimism of the early 1900s – and of the trickery and stage management that defined what was also the great era of American theatre. There's also the psychological view. "Our games are sort of a Rorschach test," says Levine, attempting, finally, to explain players' fierce connections to his thoughtful visions of hell. "People have varied interpretations of the first game, and they already have varied interpretations of this one too. I'm not really looking to define it for people. I'd rather they had the space for their own relationship."

For *Infinite*, that relationship will be wrapped up in Columbia, the floating monument that is also a battleship; the eagle with an olive branch in one claw, and arrows in the other. It's a symbol of the utopia and the dystopia. It's also a reminder of the territories that games can explore if they only choose to. Onwards into the dark dreams of men, then. Onwards into the heart of America's grand contradiction. ■

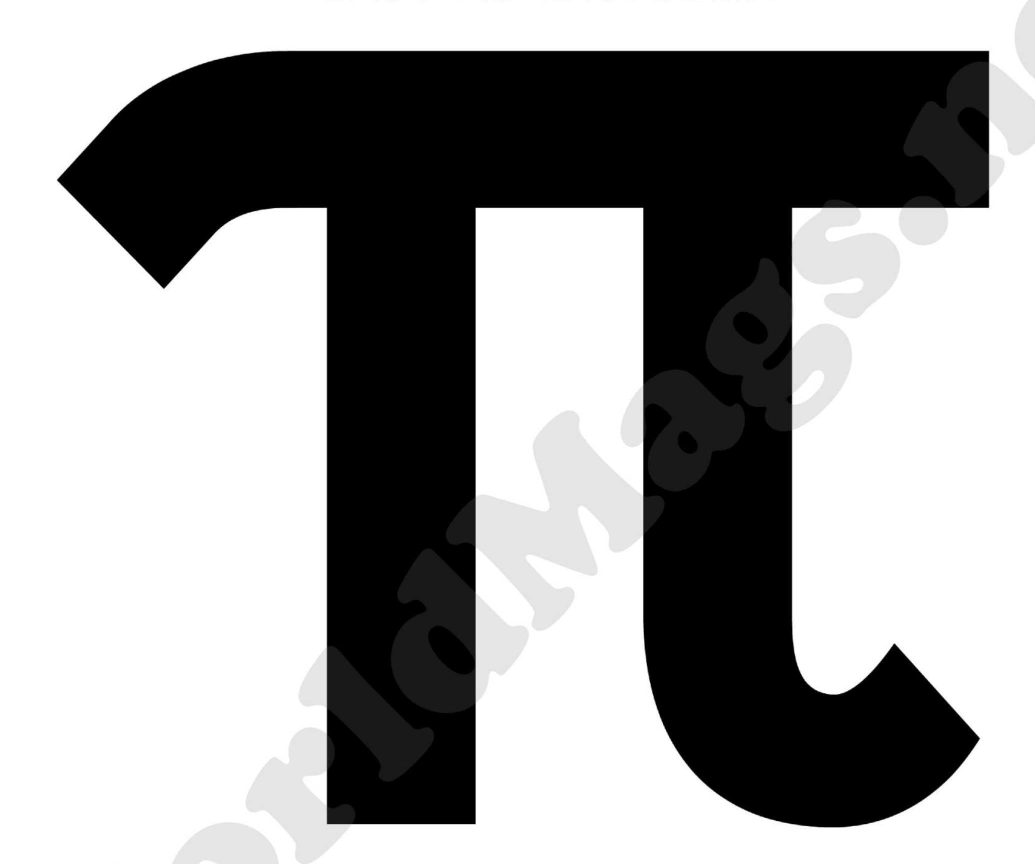




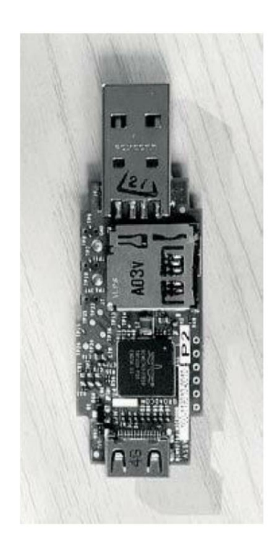
www.bit.ly/jS4ndM
Art and screenshot gallery



EASY AS RASPBERRY



How a tiny box of tricks is helping David Braben in his mission to foster a new generation of game makers



Like a USB thumb-drive minus its case in appearance, the alpha version of Frontier's Raspberry Pi hardware lacked key features

Picture the scene. It's 1982 – a pre-school summer camp in rural East Anglia, England. The sun is going down, the toys are put away, and the kids have been reclaimed from local parks and sports grounds. Getting them back out into their parents' waiting cars, though, is proving a bit tricky. The problem, specifically, is a monitor sat between coat hooks and door, upon which a small turtle is doodling around a big black space, leaving little white pixels in its wake. This is Logo, an educational programming language born in the world of robotics. For the sake of this true story, we'll call it 'Chapter One'.

To cut to the chase, Chapter Two sees many of those same kids learn that just a few lines in BBC BASIC can spawn a screenful of 'MR COBB IS A NIMROD', and from there it takes just a few more to let the user choose both victim *and* pejorative. Chapter Three involves transplanting the game *Hunchback* from the pages of a magazine; Chapter Four is called, simply, '*Elite*'. And Raspberry Pi? That's a whole new volume.

A single-board computer powered by a 700MHz ARM processor, equipped with USB support, HDMI output and hardware-accelerated 3D graphics, this fetchingly named device has a small profile (credit card size), an even smaller price ($25-$35 depending on RAM), and colossal ambitions. Fronted by **David Braben**, head of Frontier Developments and graduate of a now extinct computer science culture in schools, the Raspberry Pi Foundation wants nothing less than a revolution in how programming is seen and, even more crucially, taught.

"A PC is very daunting and very, very easy to mess up, or at least there's the fear of that"

Braben talks us through the meaning of that on p87, but in the meantime let's look at the device itself. Device? Computer, really. 'Device' suggests singular function and intent, and this is anything but. The obvious headline is that it can run *Quake III Arena*, "but I think it's fair to say it's quite a way beyond that in terms of what it can do," Braben points out. "It will be able to do things that you'd consider a lot more contemporary, but these are the things available freely that can we can show running easily."

Besides, that's not the real crux of what Pi is all about. Yes, it runs on a Linux core and presently boots to the familiar 'X' desktop environment – LXDE, to be exact, which fits snugly into the cheaper model's 128MB (as opposed to 256MB) of RAM – which in time will be hardware-accelerated and silky smooth. And, yes, it is being looked at by the makers of open-source media champion XBMC, and can decode 1080p video through its Broadcom GPU. So, yes, it packs a lot of power for something smaller (and almost cheaper) than the average portable USB hub.

Thinking of it in those terms, though, risks slotting it into the profile of any old homebrew device. "That's not the point," Braben says. "There's a huge gap between [making UGC in] *Halo* Forge, *Rollercoaster Tycoon* or *LittleBigPlanet*, and the things at the top end like XNA where you've gotta know your bananas to get engaged in it. For me, the BBC Micro crossed that gap. Actually, the bottom bit didn't even exist back then, but it shows that there's a will to learn 'programming Lego'."

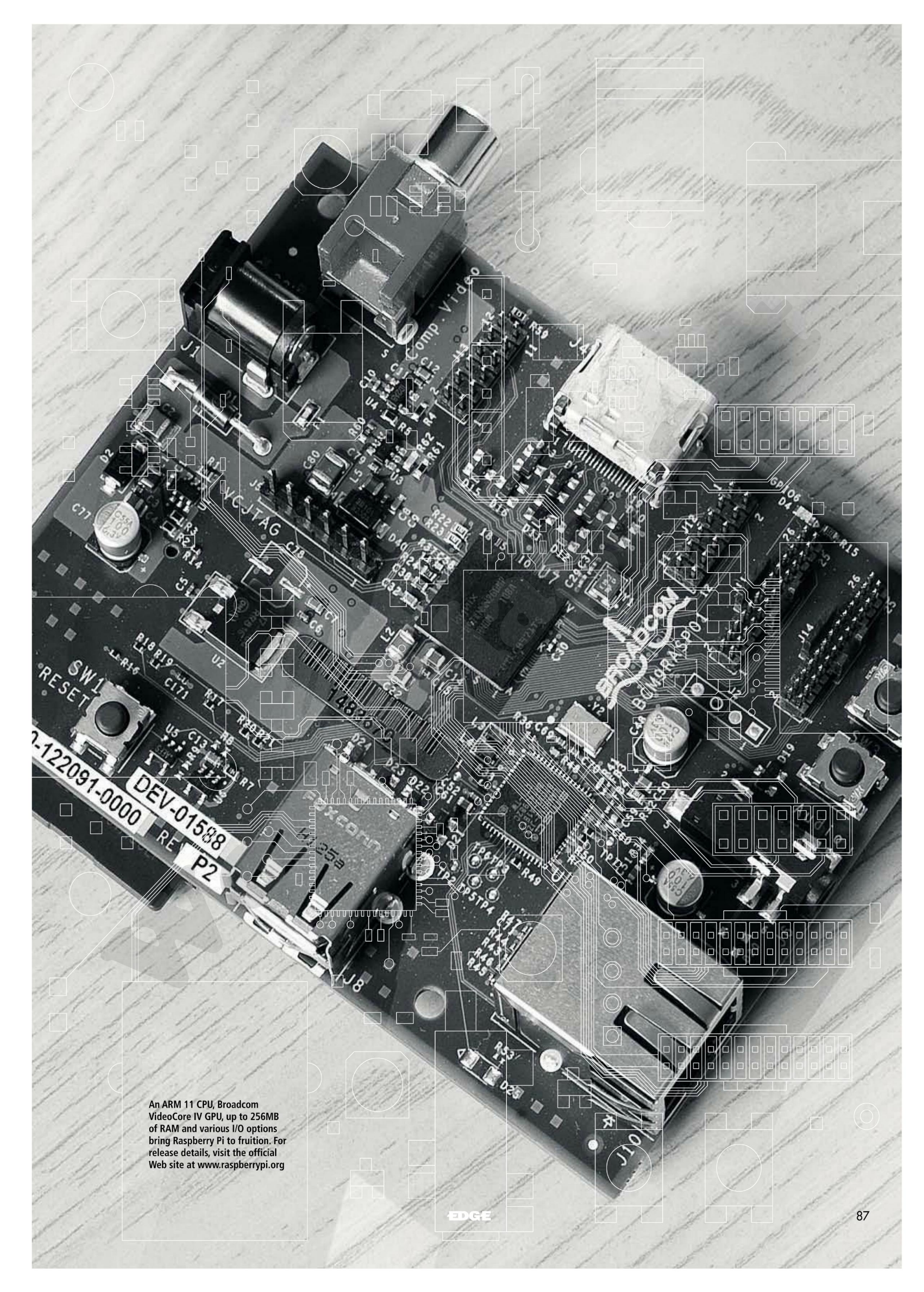
By being small and cheap enough to find its way into every schoolbag in this country and beyond, Raspberry Pi could potentially become a constructionist tool for all kinds of classroom scenarios. Kids can learn by making virtual objects, directed by a mix of syllabus and whimsy, and in the process demystify the code behind things they use on a daily basis. Games, gadgets, phones and other everyday machines: all are deceptively simple, Braben says, when you look beyond the UI.

Speaking of which, much about Raspberry Pi has yet to change on that front. The version currently slated for release in December is a developer board, naked as the day it was soldered, and lacking in bespoke software. In time, though, it should boot to something a lot more familiar to times gone by.

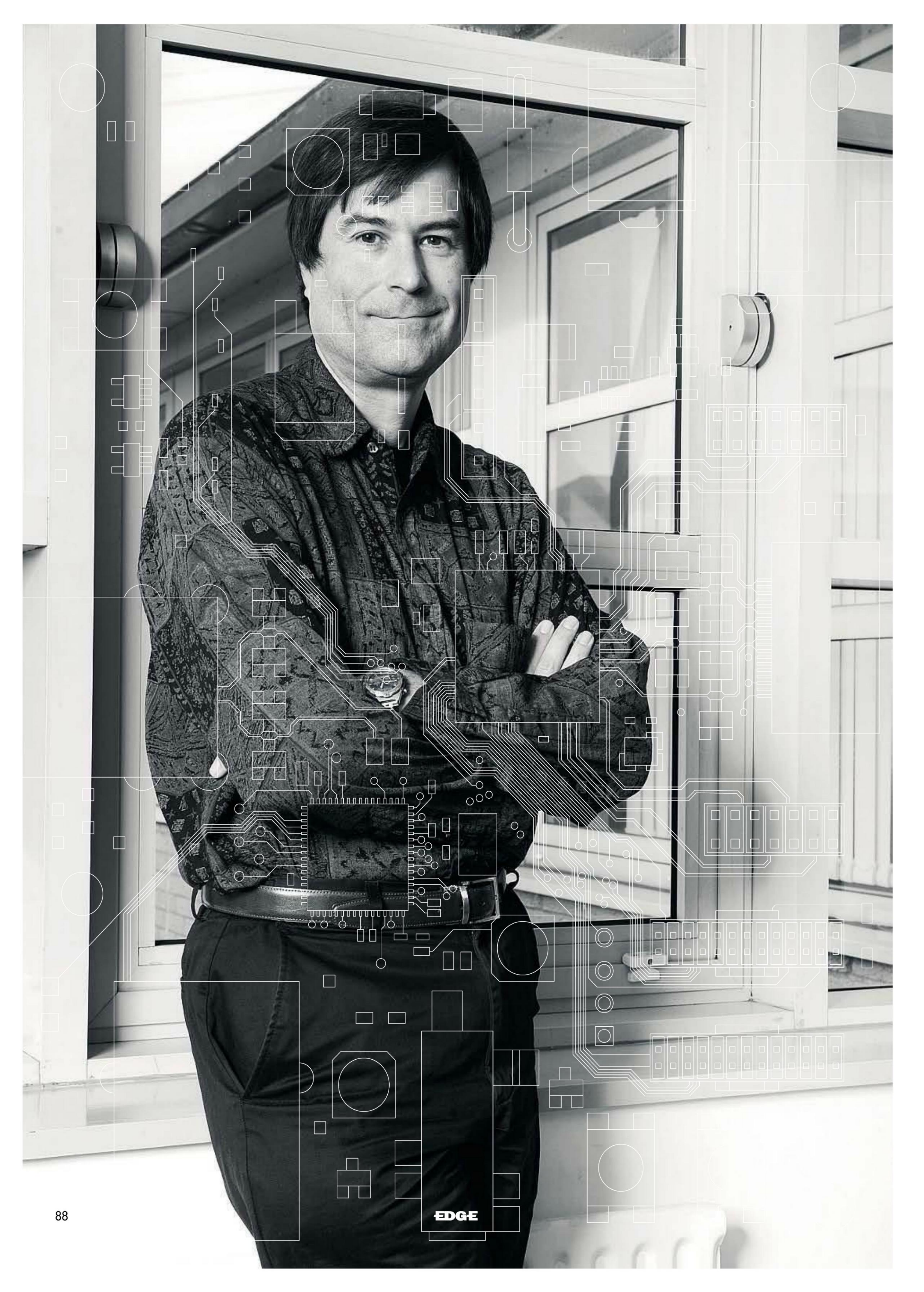
"We've got something that MIT did called Scratch [a 'programming language for everyone'], which we actually showed running on a recent Newsnight piece. That sort of thing… you look at it and go, 'Oh, I could do that.' A PC is very daunting and very, very easy to mess up, or at least there's the fear of that – that it'll never, ever boot again. And it's not entirely unfounded: you delete the wrong .dll and it's actually really hard to get your PC back if you don't know what your kid did. That's a really big problem in schools."

There is no permanent storage on Raspberry Pi, just a single SD Card slot that contains all it needs to boot and operate. Though Braben posits (with a grin like the Cheshire Cat) that you could run BBC BASIC solely from the CPU's primary cache with the speed of Assembler, it's important that a 'bricked' unit can be restored just by swapping in a new SD Card. There's every intention, furthermore, to actually include BASIC, "though there may or may not be a problem with those magic three letters."

Hesitant to fall back on the trendy phrase 'crowd-sourcing', Braben nonetheless admits that community is key to building up Raspberry Pi's software library. With 50 units in the wild now, 10,000 ready to be bought from its Web site, and deals in place with "a very wide range of different people, from education to technology companies to well-meaning individuals who have great pieces of software," the hope is that the community runs with the board – with the *idea* behind the board – and takes it to that place resembling Braben's youth, where computers meant programs, and programs meant possibility.



An ARM 11 CPU, Broadcom VideoCore IV GPU, up to 256MB of RAM and various I/O options bring Raspberry Pi to fruition. For release details, visit the official Web site at www.raspberrypi.org



Q&A: David Braben

Tucked away on its homepage, Frontier Developments' claim to a 'strong mix' of titles holds true despite the occasional setback (which we talk about on p12). Raspberry Pi confirms that its horizons are broadening, too, though the challenges involved stretch far beyond the abilities of The Little Board That Could. More than just hardware, Pi is out to redesign learning, turning back the clock to more adventurous times, as Braben explains.

Do you think it's true that people can feel very small next to the edifice of modern programming?
What makes people feel small is the daunting aspect of the technology. I don't think it's got that much more complicated, but the issue is that there's so much done with it. It's a bit like the invention of the internal combustion engine, where there'd be no cars around at all – you'd be lucky to see one. Twenty years later there are cars everywhere but it's still the same internal combustion engine, it's just been refined a bit. And so, with programming, the techniques we're using now are actually remarkably similar. We know better how to debug; now you expect to do object-orientated programming; but there's no harm in making those same old mistakes because it's part of the learning process.

There is this myth that it's fiercely complex. It's complex, but not fiercely. Just about everything we do in life is complex in some way, from a script to a play, to a recipe for a fancy piece of food. But once you're familiar with it you're also not afraid. That's really what I'd hope Raspberry Pi can do.

I think that education has really missed a generation or two where they, in my opinion, haven't been educating in this sector. I blame ICT [information and communication technologies lessons in schools] but I'm not getting on that soapbox right now. The real problem is with kids coming out of schools not really knowing what's going on inside their device, whether it's a mobile phone, laptop, iPad… Fundamentally, all those devices are the same to some level of detail. The generation of people coming through school now we could equip very easily.

But how do you get them interested to begin with?
I think of Raspberry Pi as a vehicle for enthusing about technology in a really positive way that doesn't gets labelled in a horrible way. One of the things I really want to build on is to put together a TV series where we can look at issues and things. There's so much information on so many issues that are already in the public domain, from deforestation to social issues with housing or whatever. You can *look* at those problems – the satellite photos, etc, are all on the Internet now. So: writing a programme that processes it, and putting that up on a commons site and saying, "Look, here's the tool, do what you like with it. You can look to see how much hardwood's disappeared in the last year." It means that people have a way of coming at an issue directly, themselves, rather than coming off a Web site. And all of that is sparking interest.

Are the limits of the technology as important as its features? Should it not be able to do 'too much'?
There's a controlling instinct there that I think is problematic. Let it do what people want it to do. I get annoyed with my iPad when you can't add more than one attachment to an email. It's so irritating, and the reason they've done that is that they've tried to make fewer menu items. What puts people off technology is when things are greyed out. "Why is that greyed out! I want to use it!" People aren't as stupid as people like to make out. If you look at things and it's not obvious what's going on, that's the problem.

"It wouldn't surprise me if you see a Kinect walking around on top of a robot pretty soon"

What we're really doing is putting tools in the hands of people to do exciting things with. My hope is that we'll get people doing all sorts of things in all kinds of exciting directions: amazing robots with wires hanging out of them that actually look quite dangerous, attaching a video camera to them. I think that's fantastic. That, in sixth form and universities, would be the absolute perfect use for it. It wouldn't surprise me if you see a Kinect walking around on top of a robot pretty soon.

Should we expect Pi demoscenes and the like?
I think some of those things are really lovely, and what I'm actually hoping is that there'll be a demoscene of things in BASIC or some simple language which a kid can pull it apart and go, "Oh, that's not so complicated, I'll tweak it and do it this way." That's how I started, really. Looking at things other people had written – astonishingly simple programs. There was this animal learning program which I think was an eight-line database. 'Is it a giraffe? How do you distinguish between them?' So it's really just building a tree, yet it seems to be building a world. That was the thing I thought was phenomenal, and that's where I think people are missing out.

For this, though, you're optimising not for memory but for the *smallness* of a program, which is very similar. So, a kid looks at it and goes: "I understand that. I can make one of my own." Perceptually they've done something completely novel, but actually they've just taken a small step from what already existed, and that's what learning does really well. ■



THINKING WITHOUT THE BOX

It's hard not to see Raspberry Pi's lack of case as much as an aesthetic choice as a way of keeping the cost down. It's a marvel of form-factor engineering, for sure, and you instantly learn a lot just by looking at it. Powering the system has been a major issue, and its original USB-stick-sized alpha board had a USB plug "that required a hub more expensive than the device," laughs Braben. The later versions have sockets, though, and do in fact act as USB hubs themselves. The development board requires an external power brick, but a switch to micro-USB power input should make the release version compatible with all kinds of everyday chargers.

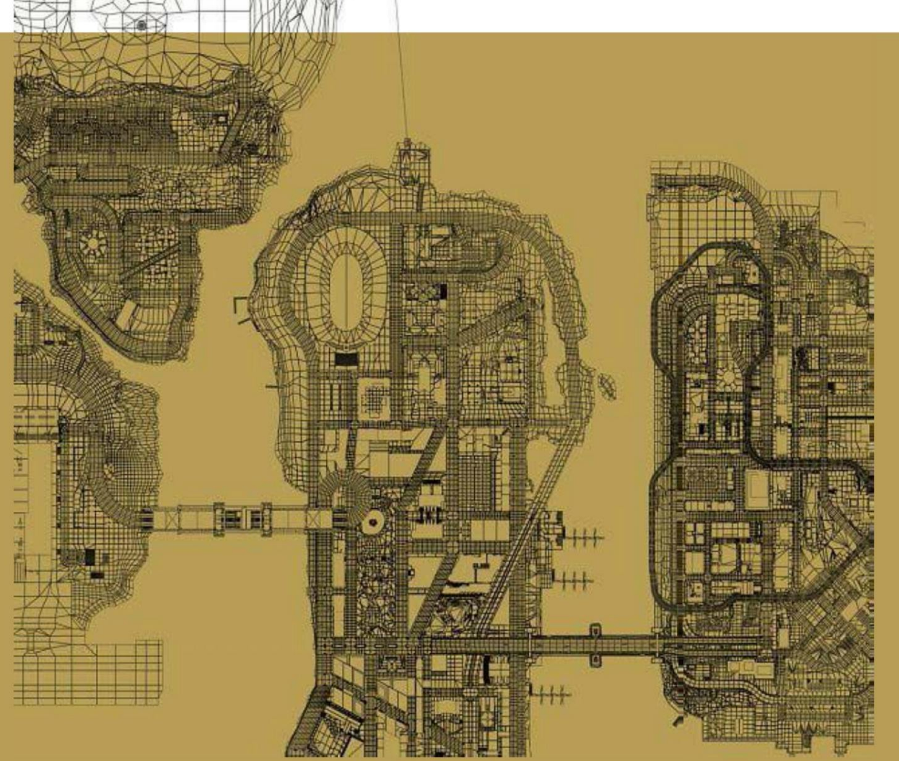
LIBERTY

With GTAIII, Rockstar changed

CITY STORY

gaming forever. This is how it did it

Sometimes our reviewers get it wrong – the not-particularly-enthusiastic 8/10 handed out to *Grand Theft Auto III* back in 2001 a jarring case in point. Still, it's not like the game needed permission to sell over 15m copies – or to go on to have such a profound influence on gaming as a whole. Today, open worlds – virtual societies streamed from disc, with cluttered roads, pavements and airwaves – are a part of every major publisher's portfolio. Would anyone but Rockstar, though, have had the cojones to do it first? To figure out the systems and methods required to achieve what many, even within its own publisher, considered impossible? After a decade that's seen the formula applied to a Western (*Red Dead Redemption*) and the classroom (*Bully*), we ask the game's co-writer/co-producer **Dan Houser** to explain how it all began.



THE STUDIO

Infrastructures, objectives, relationships, laws and a healthy amount of law-breaking: much has been built since the days of DMA Design, the studio that would later become Rockstar North. And it's a good job, too, according to Houser. "DMA was in turmoil when we began the game, having shrunk to around a dozen guys in the months after becoming part of Rockstar, with very few people believing this game could be made. We were very fortunate because the core of what became the *GTAIII* team were happy and in place, centred on Leslie Benzies, Aaron Garbut, Adam Fowler [still the series' producer, art director and technical director, respectively] and Obbe Vermeij, who had just completed [PS1/N64 platformer] *Space Station Silicon Valley* with us, and were used to 3D.

"We wanted a UK development hub, and believed the core guys, few as they were, were uniquely talented and worked very well with us. The tiny nature of the *GTAIII* team – 22 guys in Scotland, I think, and maybe six in New York – was in some ways its strength, as people worked well across departments, and the entrenchment between, code, design, animation and art did not happen."

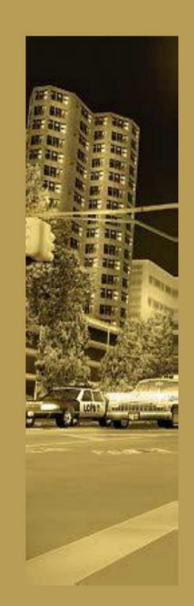
Watching this relationship mature both within and between Rockstar's Scottish and American

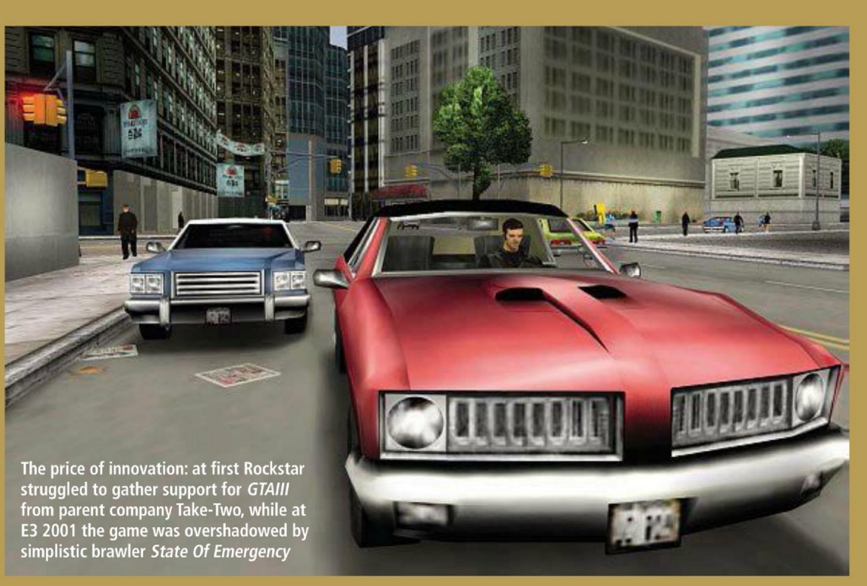
THE TECHNOLOGY

The old adage stands: before you can build, first you must destroy. Prior *GTA*s may have had a deceptively advanced 3D engine tucked under their façades, but a sophisticated 3D world was another thing entirely. Well, *almost* entirely. "[*GTAIII*] took what was essentially a sketch of an idea and turned it into something that was alive and unique, but in so doing created so many enormous problems, of every possible kind, that we had to solve as we went along," Houser explains. "The only mechanic we kept was the carjacking, and the only other things we really kept were the ideas of an open, non-linear city and the radio. Everything else had to be made from scratch.

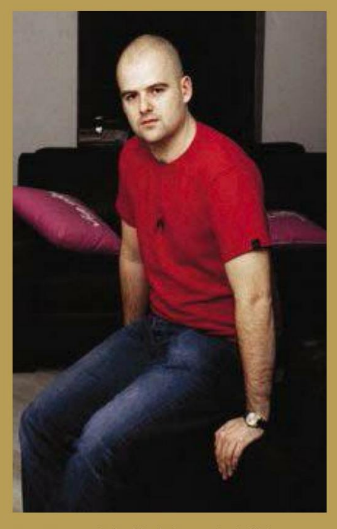
"There's a lot in there that now seems very standard, but this game was among the first to figure it out, in all areas: technical, such as streaming data off the disc, and motion-captured cutscenes rendered in the same engine as the rest of the game; design, such as the seamless transition between driving and on-foot sections via one animation; audio, with every pedestrian having a unique voice and so on. The transition to 3D was so hard and required so much that was new that our very naïvety was probably useful, otherwise we would never have done it."

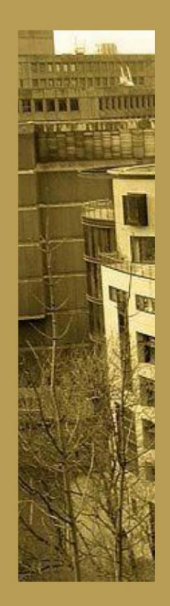
The point at which Rockstar president (and Dan's brother) Sam Houser became convinced of *GTAIII*'s real potential came when he first viewed a work-in-progress carjacking animation. For Dan, though, "it was more gradual. As each pass of content went in, and the game became more stable and more fun – really from late 2000 onwards – it became more and more obvious that the game was coming together and that the enormous technological challenges of building and displaying a massive, open 3D world and of filling it with life were being overcome, and that those of us who put content into this world had better step up to the mark."

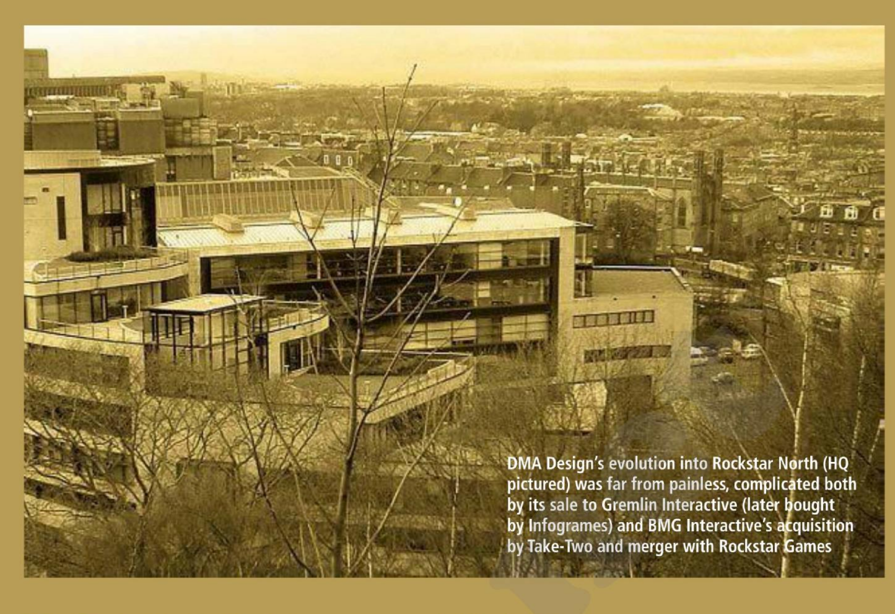




The price of innovation: at first Rockstar struggled to gather support for *GTAIII* from parent company Take-Two, while at E3 2001 the game was overshadowed by simplistic brawler *State Of Emergency*


Dan Houser is behind the series' dialogue and stories, artfully rehabilitating clichés




DMA Design's evolution into Rockstar North (HQ pictured) was far from painless, complicated both by its sale to Gremlin Interactive (later bought by Infogrames) and BMG Interactive's acquisition by Take-Two and merger with Rockstar Games

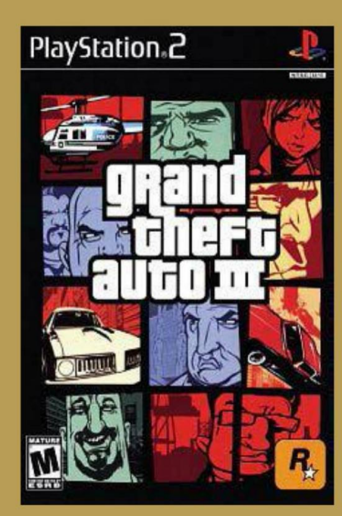
studios proved the most profound aspect of the game's creation, particularly "how we learned to work together, trust one another and use each individual's expertise for the benefit of the game," Houser explains. "Sam, Leslie, Aaron and Andy Semple, who runs Rockstar North, have done an amazing job over the years to ensure that while there may be some geographical distance between us, it feels like one team, working together and executing a common vision. From a structural standpoint, it helped solidify the model that we try to follow with our projects, and from a personal standpoint, to work closely with such a world-class, ambitious and innovative crew was inspiring."



THE LAUNCH

Fifteen million copies. Did anyone see it coming? "Yes and no," Houser says. "Of course we weren't quite vain enough to imagine the success, as no one started a game's development then thinking they would sell [that much]. That being said, once we'd figured out a few of the basics and had the car, some of the map and some of the on-foot sections running, I think we could sense the game was going to be something very interesting, at least to us, and each extra layer of design and content that got put upon it only reinforced that feeling."

Incredibly, however, attracting support outside of the core group proved difficult. "We were convinced there was something very powerful about this open-world, seamless, multi-genre thing we were making but no one seemed to agree with us or care very much. Even within [publisher] Take Two there were doubters, and the game didn't initially ship many copies, so it was a challenge to keep believing in the face of so much doubt. But we felt strongly that there was something about the game that was unique, and once it came out it found an audience who agreed."



GTAIII's US cover art was agreed upon at the last minute, but it set in place a style for the series that has been maintained

Its release, you'll recall, came a mere six weeks after the terror attacks on the World Trade Center that claimed almost 3,000 lives – just enough time to make some last-minute changes. Significant ones? "That's a little bit of a misconception," Houser says. "We made some changes after 9/11 but they were very cosmetic. Most of the delay in releasing the game, which was only a couple of weeks, was a product of the fact that our office in New York was pretty close to Ground Zero and so any work that had to be done there was made impossible for a period. As far as I recall, we changed the colour of the cop cars so they weren't identical to NYPD, we altered the flight path of a plane so that it didn't look like it was flying into or behind a skyscraper, and we removed one mission as it made a reference to terrorists,

plus a few lines of pedestrian dialogue and a line or two of talk radio. Some people believe we removed an entire strand of missions because they found some reference in the code to a character called Darkel, but he had been cut months before [release] and the missions were never completed.

"The mood in the office… well, we were close to Ground Zero and lived in New York but, as people who didn't work in financial services, we didn't know too many people directly affected. It was very upsetting, very unnerving and overwhelming – perhaps particularly as people who work in media: to see a moment seemingly designed by its architects to be consumed by media, and to watch it on television and out of your window at the same time. It was the same for us as it was for anybody. But we also felt we'd come this close to making this great game and that despite these problems, just as despite the problems of Take Two, it was our duty to finish it.

"Probably the biggest single change was to the game's US box cover, which was significant in that it created the template for what was to become the game's look in all subsequent iterations. That was done by one of our artists in an evening and as soon we saw it, we preferred it to the cover we had planned to use."



Early character sketches suggest a more cartoony vibe than that of the final game

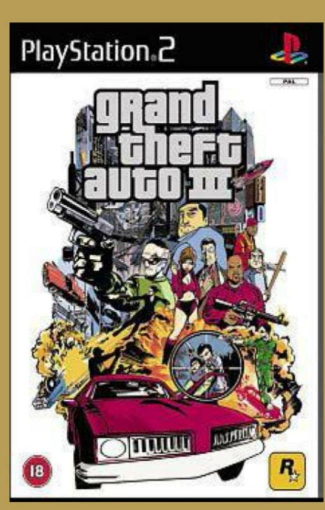
THE CAST

So character-based is *GTA* nowadays that it seems inconceivable that it could have been anything else, yet even during early *GTAIII* development the cast played an uncertain role. Houser recalls: "I suppose we felt it would be somewhat expanded upon. We kept ignoring the issue of cutscenes because we had no idea how to solve it, and we knew it was a potentially enormous problem that could make or break the game, or blow the budget entirely.

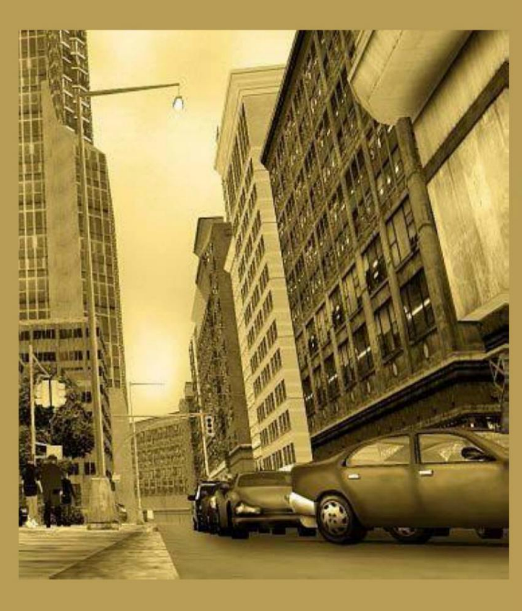
"At that time it felt like Take Two was constantly on the point of going bust, and various ideas were suggested for solving the problem of cutscenes. Then, in late 2000, we started looking into the idea of cutscenes using motion-capture which previously had really only been used for one-off animations like fighting moves. We met up with Perspective Studios, who we've worked with on every game since, and who are now our internal motion-capture facility. They suggested that two bodies in the volume would be possible but if we pushed we could get three, as long as the takes were short enough. It was as much a learning experience for them, as they'd never done anything like it before either.

"So, with this approach nailed, we began to flesh out the characters and story. The goal with



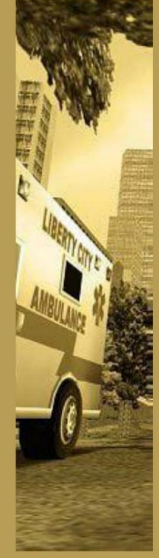


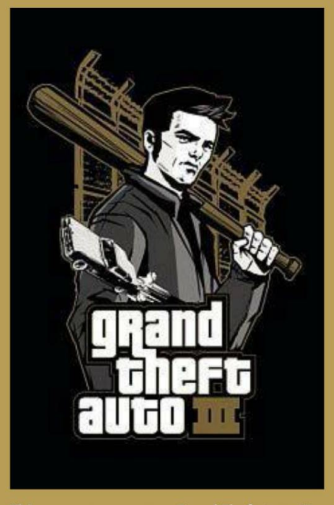
The UK box art feels lighter than its US cousin. Inside, though, was the same full-tilt content that defined a generation











This new art promotes *Grand Theft Auto III: 10 Year Anniversary*, which Rockstar Leeds has developed for iOS and Android devices

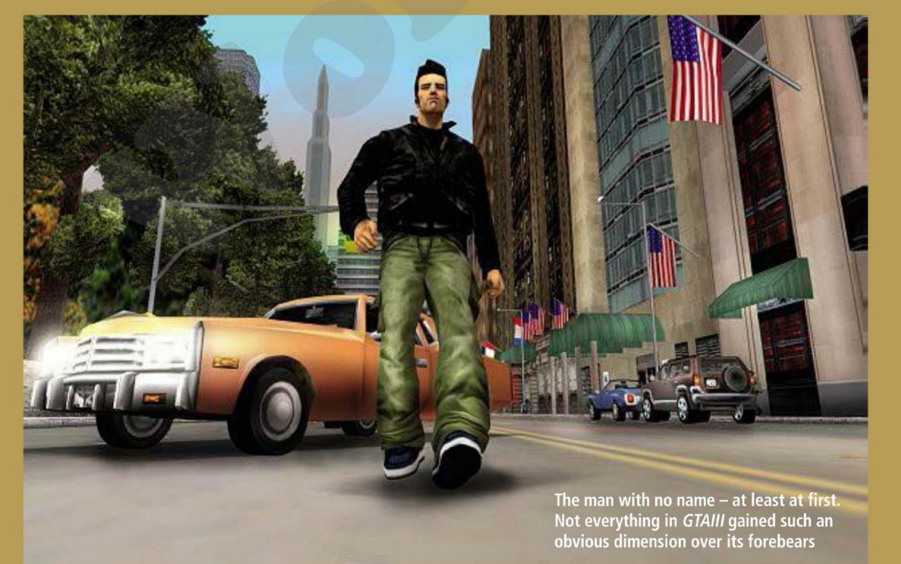
the game, as with the other PS2-era [Rockstar] games, was to try to give the player the sensation of being in their own TV show. With very limited time available, we wanted characters that were fairly broad and archetypal, but with enough depth that visiting them five times would be interesting. We also wanted a good range of characters so the game wasn't merely Mafiosi but a variety of different people – so it would have an epic scope and a sense of trawling through a city's underworld."

So began the coming and going of Rockstar's interest in Hollywood talent, especially stars with an onscreen history of one underworld or another. Kyle MacLachlan and Robert Loggia (Blue Velvet both), Michael Madsen (Reservoir Dogs) and Joe Pantoliano (Bound, The Sopranos) all signed up, but their peers weren't exactly knocking Rockstar's door down.

"There was the usual videogame prejudice, of course, which was far more pronounced in 2001 than it is today," Houser explains, "so there were many actors who turned us down flat as they felt it was beneath them. Lots of people who did turn up thought it would be like narrating a pinball game, and expected a large cheque for five minutes' work, then would turn up and have pages of work to do and be upset that they actually had to work that day. The process itself was very abstract and far from perfect: we made it up entirely as we went along. Actors were watching lo-res renders of unfinished mo-cap and having to sync their performances to someone else's actions, which was a little awkward." This process was "abandoned a few years ago," he adds.

Such was the lack of money and experience behind *GTAIII* that just four people performed every mo-cap role in the game. As such, it fell to the voice talent to bring personality, some of whom seemed to leave it at home. "Some were great and some were atrocious, in terms of being people," Houser says. "Most famous actors are pretty good at their job, so the results, once we'd overcome the technical hurdles and occasional personality malfunction, were usually pretty spectacular."

Nevertheless, this practice of aiming for the stars was abandoned by the time *Bully* and *GTAIV* came along. "This was something we realised on *San Andreas* when some fairly minor comedian stormed out because he did not want to play a gay-ish character, and, short of time, we used the motion-capture actor with excellent results," Houser explains. "Now, our motion-capture facility is a sound stage and we record motion, audio and facial performances all at the same time."



The man with no name – at least at first. Not everything in *GTAIII* gained such an obvious dimension over its forebears



Turf warfare. From top: *GTAIII*'s Triads, Yardies and Yakuza





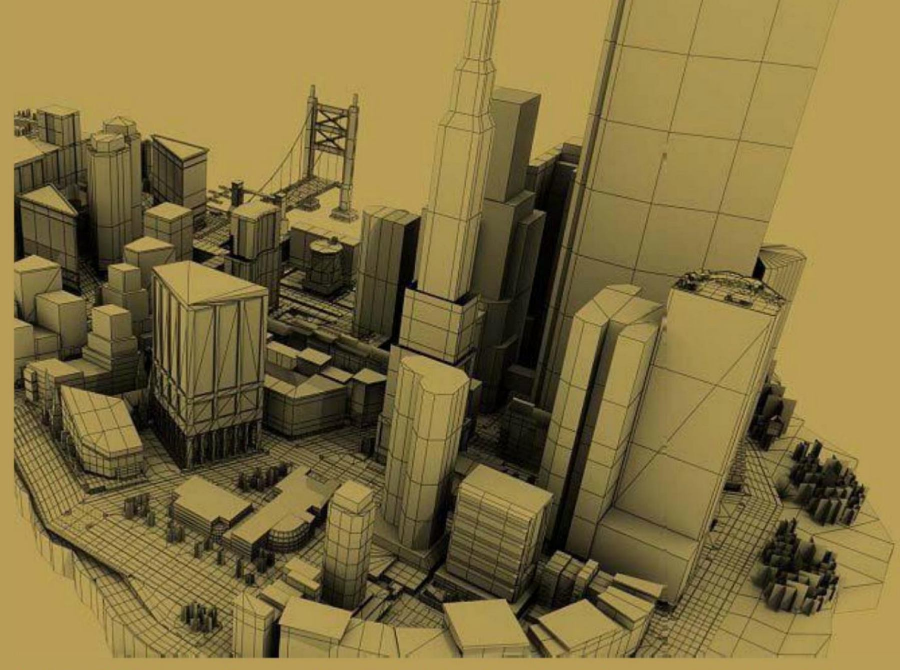


THE AIRWAVES

Even if you're a Juliette Lewis or a Chuck D, there are far worse gigs than hosting one of *GTA*'s radio stations. If you're Lazlow Jones, though, the US talkshow host and writing partner for those stations, it can transform your career. Being the series' most realistic game to date, not to mention its first on DVD, *GTAIII* needed to broadcast more than just licensed music.

"Sam really wanted a radio system that gave the sensation of really flicking through the dial of a radio," Houser recalls, "full of great music, but also personality and Americana that would help gel the world together. Lazlow came on board because he was as annoying as we were but also was a freelance commercial producer and DJ. He, Craig [Conner, audio lead] and I had similar outlooks and complementary technical skills – to be honest, they had all of the technical skills; I was just the cheerleader – and we developed the execution together.

"The last thing we wrote was the talk radio station, and decided to use Lazlow as the voice because we'd run out of time to find a real actor. We were nervous about the station but I think – once we had the bit where one of the game characters, Toni, called up to complain about his mother – it did a great job of linking the world and the narrative together."



On the list of *GTAIII*'s many achievements, Liberty City itself sits at the top. Though the game was built using RenderWare, DMA Design's purpose-built streaming technology enabled the delivery of a world unlike anything that had gone before

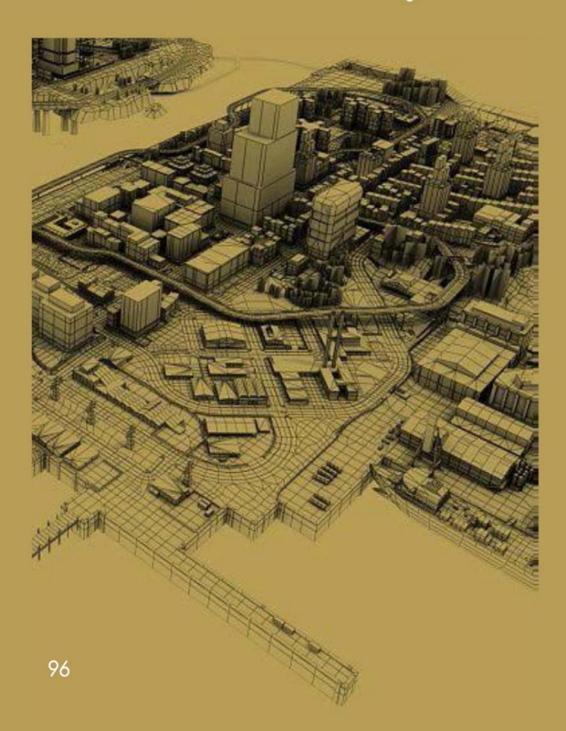
THE SANDBOX

Blackly comic crime thriller or anarchic toybox: which did Rockstar set out to make? "Both," Houser says. "The challenge to us was always in the idea of combining non-linear emergent experiences with somewhat structured narrative experiences, and combining them in a way that gave you the best of both. This was always the goal, even though we were perfectly aware that it was impossible to make both because they are, in many ways, opposite approaches. Making a strong narrative requires focus, and making a perfect open-world experience requires the opposite – absolute freedom – the challenge was always to find a balance.

"This has been the same in every open-world game we've made since then. It's impossible to get it perfect, and in any one game we've drifted – too much – in one direction or another. But it is something we strive for, as we believe it's at the heart of the power of games – the chance to be in a world and make choices as a character in that world.

"One of the goals of *GTAIII*, and something we've tried to stick to in all ensuing games, is that there's a tonal consistency across all aspects of a game so that it feels like a coherent experience – that the game's look, the characters, the mission design, the dialogue, the narrative themes, the things pedestrians talk about, the animation, the physics, the lighting and so on all feel like they belong together, and that every component part serves the others. The story has to be told by the missions, and the missions unlock the game's features, so that the features and the narrative are intertwined in a way that should feel reasonably seamless."

And the cheats? "I think they were always in the game, but not formalised until later on," Houser says. "Given a big part of the game was its open-world element, there was the sense that good cheat codes would be really fun. What we didn't imagine was how popular good glitches would be!"





Thanks to Flashback 95.6, Paul Engemann's 'Push It To The Limit' will only ever be associated in our minds with the streets of Liberty City

THE NEW GTA

The job of a good trailer: answer only what is necessary, and answer it well. The *GTAV* trailer just about does it, though it took an additional press release to cement the pitch. "[The game] heads to the city of Los Santos and surrounding hills, countryside and beaches," it clarifies. In the interim was the gobsmacking notion that Rockstar could actually deliver the interstate majesty of *San Andreas* with the street-level minutiae of *GTAIV*. If it doesn't, perhaps it's for the best. And besides, expectations are different now, switched from macro to micro.

It's in this realm, where the lowering of a convertible's hardtop can be met by stunningly animated indifference from a Venice Beach princess, that *GTA* really pushes the envelope. Draw distance is *so* last-gen. Even the farewell shot of the *GTAV* trailer – a view of downtown LA from the vantage point of a sleek private jet – is more about lighting and particles. The interaction of sun and smog, in fact, is the star of every scene. The best day/night cycle in gaming has, we assume, only improved since *Red Dead Redemption*.

Like the Koyaanisqatsi-themed teaser for *IV*, this one opens with a voiceover; it does not, however, end with a reveal. Instead we're left to speculate – wildly, of course, across the entire Internet – that the game will feature multiple protagonists. Is that really CJ being chased by the cops? Claude backpacking up a mountain? Tommy Vercetti in the over-the-shoulder close-up? The speculation machine is in overdrive, putting two and two together to equal five, 55, or whatever sounds good in the moment. It can't be Tommy, they say, because Ray Liotta's not involved – as if the two are somehow inseparable.

Another rule of the teaser trailer: the payoff has to at least hold up to the best of the valid theories. If this story about "pursuit of the almighty dollar" isn't some franchise-spanning where-are-they-now type affair, then it's going to need one amazing ensemble cast.



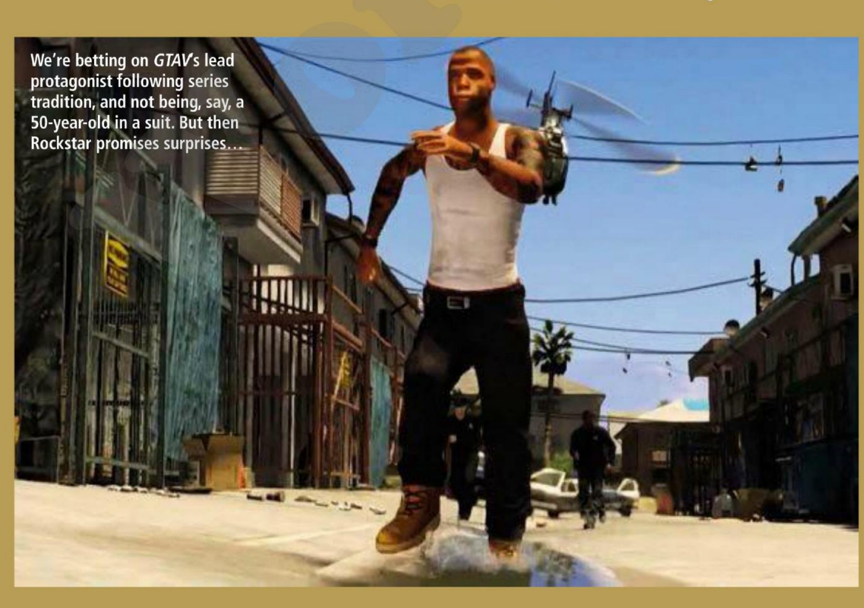
GTAV is, naturally, the biggest production Rockstar has ever undertaken. In the air, the game features both commercial and military jet aircraft, alongside the odd blimp or two



If the map is essentially LA, then nothing but a tour of every Panavision money-shot Michael Mann ever did will do. Show jets and we must fly them; V-neck sweaters and we must buy them. And if there are wind turbines over them thar Vinewood Hills, then we must fly between them in our V-neck sweaters, preferably without crashing into invisible walls.

Can it be trusted? Yes. *GTAIV* delivered everything shown in every one of its trailers, and there's a deliberate candour to *GTAV*'s. Released at a console-friendly 720p and plagued with saw-tooth jagged edges, its contents are realtime current-gen, warts and all. A PC version is inevitable, if not on day one. FXAA has made aliasing on the platform almost extinct. Why, then, if not to send a message, would Rockstar choose second best? Simple. When you've pulled off the impossible, bettering the world of *GTAIV* in what appears to be every respect, only through imperfection will your audience ever believe it.

"*Grand Theft Auto V* is another radical reinvention of the *Grand Theft Auto* universe," Rockstar president **Sam Houser** declares in that press release. More than just burgers and car customisation, surely, and more than this trailer's chosen to give away. Timelines? Heroes? Other plurals? From the company that gave us *Table Tennis*, who could possibly say? ■



We're betting on *GTAV*'s lead protagonist following series tradition, and not being, say, a 50-year-old in a suit. But then Rockstar promises surprises…

PLAY

REVIEWS. INTERVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception PS3
Can the set-pieces get any bigger without becoming ludicrous? We definitely don't want to set foot on any flying or floating vehicle with a man as catastrophe-prone as Nathan Drake. But then again, he's such good company, as are his friends: we've got the Sully backstory now, so If it's not too early to put in requests for *Uncharted 4*, we'd like more of the Chloe-Elena-Drake dynamic of the second game, please.

Dark Souls 360, PS3
Why do we keep coming back, again and again, to its burning fires of difficulty? Despite a slew of high-profile releases vying for our attention this month, the siren call of From Software's knee-tremblingly tough dungeon crawler has us submitting to the masochistic urge to play 'just one more time'. That it's now 3am and we've got work in the morning is hardly any reason not to have a pop at that next boss, is it?

Ace Combat: Assault Horizon 360, PS3
Consider Original controls a new difficulty level, putting the ability to roll your craft back in your hands. Entering dogfight mode becomes less a convenience and more a challenge as you hurtle onwards and upwards in hot pursuit of the metal birds raining hell on the land and sea. A contender for this year's fastest game. And certainly one of the loudest.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



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Up-to-the-minute reviews and previews

The needs of the many versus the needs of the one

Battlefield 3 has an explosive, set-piece-driven singleplayer mode. Previously, DICE's singleplayer experiments were limited to the offshoot series *Bad Company*, but its return to *Battlefield* proper has seen it bring the storylines and scripted sequences along with it. In short, *Battlefield*'s been *COD*-ified.

The FPS is gaming's most competitive market, and it's a level of competition that's seen the games themselves transform from focused experiences into decentralised feature suites and packages of modes. *Modern Warfare 3* has a glossy, linear singleplayer campaign, and if *Battlefield*'s going to compete, then it must offer the same – never mind that it was DICE's melding of tactical freedom and huge scale in multiplayer that made the series' name.



Even intra-series one-upmanship can be seen, thanks to Activision's yearly *COD* release schedule. What is Infinity Ward doing with Survival, other than trying to outdo Zombies – the mode with which series co-custodian Treyarch most distinguishes its games? But even this formula, so thrilling at first, is beginning to feel overused.

That's not to suggest studios should refrain from providing extra modes. The multiplayer of *Assassin's Creed Revelations* (p112) develops the stealthy game of hunter-and-hunted debuted last year – and it still feels fresh second time around. But in an era when even RPGs such as *Mass Effect 3* have bowed to the pressure to provide multiplayer experiences, it's a relief to see Bethesda sticking to what it knows. *Skyrim* (p100) isn't just a resolutely singeplayer game in a market where publishers agonise over the possibility of customers trading in such titles, its epic scale and formidable depth make it the antidote to games that believe that a scattershot of styles across many modes is the only way to engage.

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

There's long existed a covenant between Bethesda and those who play its games, handed down from one hardware generation to the next. The developer fashions worlds of unrivalled scope, rich in lore and history, filled with stories to unravel and secrets to find. Then, it offers players the freedom to explore these worlds at their own pace – dawdling for hours in a particularly lush patch of forest in order to hunt game, or rushing to defeat the dark forces threatening the land. In return, our side of the bargain is simple – we do all we can to ignore the rough edges that come, apparently, as the cost of such ambition.

Skyrim still takes place in a world where a woolly mammoth can suddenly levitate a hundred feet into the sky and stay there. It still takes place in a world where trying to aid the city watch in a battle against a rampaging dragon can see you arrested and taken to prison – before the battle's over, mind – for striking one of the soldiers with a glancing blow. It's still a world where a nobleman will try, repeatedly, to enter a tavern, having forgotten to climb off his horse first. It's a world of clunking animation, of reused voice actors, of bandits talking over their own death throes. It's a world that's entirely engaging one moment and an utter farce the next. But it's a world that, providing you offer up your suspension of disbelief, delivers more than most games even attempt.

Much remains unchanged since the release of *Oblivion*, but the most significant differences are felt in the landscape itself. Whereas *Oblivion*'s Cyrodiil was a patchwork of varying terrains – its place at the heart of Bethesda's fictional Empire giving its artists a chance to experiment with the visual styles of each province – Skyrim as a country is much more strongly defined. Cold is the reigning motif here – and *Skyrim* offers up every interpretation of chilliness you can imagine. Alpine-style villages appear, as do rugged, blizzard-swept peaks. Leafy, autumnal forests give way to salt marshes, sparkling glaciers and bleak, empty tundra, which in turn merge back into snowy woods filled with evergreen pine. This is unapologetically a song of ice, not fire, but that doesn't make it samey. Skyrim's a country as varied as Cyrodiil, but one that also holds together convincingly as a place.

Mist rises off rivers in the early morning, and salmon struggle to leap upstream – but the incidental details, though welcome, aren't the real improvement. It's the sense, on both small and large scales, that a human eye has carefully crafted, tweaked and adjusted every sight you see. Settlements fit more naturally into their surrounding landscapes than the walled fortresses of *Oblivion* ever did, and rivers cut through mountain ranges before ending in wide-open basins. The mountain paths gently funnel you along planned routes, ensuring you'll always stumble across the next vista

Publisher Bethesda Softworks
Developer In-house
Format 360 (version tested), PC, PS3
Release Out now


www.bit.ly/mVCRxt
Bethesda's Todd Howard on the making of *Skyrim*

Fights with large groups soon become cacophonies of clanging metal and showers of particle effects



from the best vantage point. And this sense, that *Skyrim* has been authored rather than generated, extends to its interiors, too.

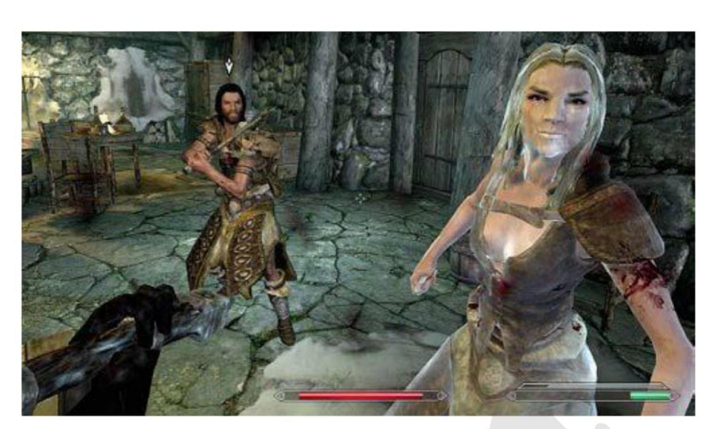
As in *Oblivion*, there are only so many assets from which *Skyrim*'s caves, forts and abandoned ruins are built, but here they're switched between more freely – meaning what starts as a cave system can branch into a crumbling crypt, before opening upon an icy, subterranean cavern of startling beauty. Narrative elements, be it notes left by previous inhabitants, or a quest marker farther ahead, gently tug you through these dungeons, but exploring them – to find out where, exactly, you'll end up – is a reward in itself. If you're going to venture deeper, however, be prepared for a fight.

Combat against the diverse range of villains, fantastical creatures and angry beasts has an altogether weightier feel than in previous games, though it retains *Oblivion*'s sense of clumsiness in a close-up scrap. You'll miss the tactical element provided by *Fallout 3*'s VATS, but its legacy is seen in the slow-motion first- and thirdperson finishers that end many an encounter. There's a great clunking heft to a sword blow, and a rich selection of magical abilities that allow you to toy with foes as much as fight them, including the new Shouts (see 'Violent discourse'). Enemies are still rather suicidal, however – and fights with large groups soon become cacophonies of clanging metal and showers of particle effects. After the smart, patient swordplay of *Dark Souls*, we can't help but crave combat that has a little more grace.

Dual-wielding, while a little oversold, does allow for some intriguing combinations of skills. In fact, its impact is felt more heavily in the character progression trees than in combat itself, as you carefully design a character to make best use of the axe in their right hand and the fireball in their left. That's if you're not tempted to spend perks in the smithing tree, however, or on improving their alchemy skills. Bethesda's streamlining of character progression, rather than dumbing down *The Elder Scrolls*, has hit upon a sweet spot of anxiety-fraught indecision. Every level gained lets you apply a small boost to your health, your stamina or your magic reserves – and unless you're playing a resolutely melee-focused build, you'll wish you could increase all three. You also get a single perk to spend across all 18 skills – and, again, it's an agonising choice. By dropping pointless skills like Athletics and Acrobatics, Bethesda has honed the abilities players want and enjoy using, and carefully distributed tempting perks across all of them. You still level the skills themselves by simply using them, meaning you can become a master pickpocket without spending a single perk. But if you want the extra 100lb carrying



ABOVE Thirdperson view is still mainly in place for vanity purposes, such as to admire a new set of armour. It's useless in combat, however, and has a tendency to break your sense of connection with the environment







ABOVE While they're capable of hunting you for miles, dragons have a tendency to spawn at a few regular points, which in our playthrough resulted in a growing collection of dragon skeletons around one particular watchtower. LEFT *BioShock*-style oil pools on dungeon floors await to be ignited. While treasure hunters will usually be rewarded with one or two juicy finds, the best loot is reserved for quest rewards

The dual-wielding system makes a magic spell in your left hand irresistible. As well as healing magic, the Restoration skill-tree offers defence-boosting buffs and magical defences that more than make up for your lack of shield

capacity locked away in the pickpocketing tree, you have to cash in the points. In the end, you're as likely to end up with a jack of all trades as before, but deliberating over these choices along the way more than makes up for any sense of specialisation lost by the abandonment of classes.

Regardless of your character's talents, you'll find quests to suit. Walk into the smallest hamlet in *Skyrim* and you'll be bombarded with job offers, with every other inhabitant sending you off to kill bandits, hunt bears or fetch treasured family heirlooms from nearby tombs. Tasks range from epic to inconsequential, and while many reduce you to the role of a simple go-between for NPCs, some of these seemingly trivial tasks can have unexpected payoffs down the line. The main quest, too, has its share of standout moments, but your voluntary journeys are the ones that linger longest in the memory: the hunt for a legendary sword triggered by reading about its one-time owner in a book; the hidden passage – leading who knows where? – you discover while exploring what *seemed* like an abandoned shack; the ghostly apparition that appears before you in a mountaintop blizzard, threatening to disappear before you can give chase. And, of course, your run-ins with the dragons.

Large, aggressive and persistent, the epic rolling battles against these beasts show *Skyrim* at its most theatrical. Dragons handle the changing landscape confidently, staying airborne when they need to but coming in close when they have the chance. They expose the best and worst of *Skyrim*'s combat. Waiting for them to land so you can batter them to death while



VIOLENT DISCOURSE
Shouts are magical abilities that draw from a separate, recharging power source to normal spells. You can equip a single Shout along with whatever's mapped to your left and right hand, meaning two-handed weapon users, or those who prefer a shield, don't have to entirely forgo extra powers. They're closely tied to the story – your character's ability to learn Shouts without any training is what makes him or her Dragonborn – and the fact you can't progress through the game without unlocking certain examples means that some dungeons offer puzzles designed neatly around their specific abilities.

staring at a screen full of scales is hard work, but archers and magic users will find a flying dragon presents an irresistibly tricky target. Dead dragons relinquish souls which in turn unlock Shouts – ensuring that, even when outmatched, there's always a temptation to stand your ground. Try to run, however, and they'll harry you for miles. And when a defeated dragon finally crashes upon a barren hillside, its flesh melting off to reveal a skeleton that will remain there, a monument to your victory, for as long as you continue playing, it's a moment of emergent grandeur in what, at times, can feel like a clockwork environment.

These moments are why you play *Skyrim*, because in the instance of breathless excitement, triumph or discovery, you invest completely in its world. You don't play because you care about the fate of Skyrim's people – no matter how many prophecies claim you must. You play for the moment a hidden switch unveils secret catacombs in what you thought was a ransacked tomb. You play for the moment a dragon's silhouette fills the sky, backed up against the otherworldly colours of the northern lights. You play for the moment a diary clutched by a desiccated corpse sends you on a country-wide hunt for some ancient, forgotten loot. The illusion frequently falters – and sometimes completely breaks – but when it does you'll want to conspire with the game to pretend you didn't see. You play on, for the moments of clever design, fortunate coincidence or downright inspiration that turn you from suspending disbelief into utterly convinced.

9

Post Script

Why lax morals – and lack of consequence – make for the freest roleplaying game of all

The beginning is pleasant enough. A visit to our local tavern after a hard day's dragon smiting. An armoured mercenary type, however, is giving us an evil look. We instigate conversation – he's rude, we're rude back. A fight begins. Moments later, he's lying dead.

We'd like to say we feel bad about it, but in all honesty, we couldn't care less. No one else seems to mind: after crowding around us dramatically for the fight itself, the tavern's customers have returned to their seats. The maid's even got a broom out, and is methodically sweeping the spot behind the dead man's head. He wasn't an important character anyway – there's another fellow over by the door who's voiced by the exact same actor.

The game accommodates our lapse into violence. There's no morality gauge in *Skyrim*, no condescending metric telling you whether what you're doing is right or wrong. Indeed, the writing in general avoids good/evil dichotomies, presenting the choice of sides to take in Skyrim's civil war, for instance, as a pragmatic, political decision, not a moral one.

And it feels wonderfully liberating. *Fallout 3* acknowledges evil deeds with a drop in your karma, while *Mass Effect 2* goes as far as showing them in Shepard's increasingly disfigured face, but *Skyrim* relies on the player's own conscience. The results, in our case, are worrying. For instance, without the sad, off-key note that accompanies every item theft in *Fallout 3*, we start pilfering remorselessly – the deciding factor in whether or not it's right to steal not being ethics, but whether or not anyone can see.

In our defence, *Skyrim* tacitly encourages such behaviour. To feel bad about a crime, you need a victim, and Bethesda fails to provide convincing ones. The samey faces and reused voice artists conspire to make NPCs feel like interchangeable animatronics, not unique individuals, and the way in which a person's friends and neighbours can swiftly move on from his or her death means that actions, outside of key narrative points, rarely feel as though they come with any genuine or long-term effect. Even *The Elder Scrolls'* legal system is amusingly short-termist, allowing you to offset all manner of evil behaviour by paying a fine. And if you really do get sent to jail, all's forgiven upon release.

Your character is an empty vessel. Their Dorian Gray-style immunity to change – no matter what they do – might be preferable to *Mass Effect 2*'s evil glowing scar tissue, but their complete absence of personality also ensures that players rarely have to think about the kind of person they're making them become. When we ask Commander Shepard to torture a prisoner, or sacrifice a colony, we have to watch and listen to her do so, and decide if this is a character we can identify with or want to be. Our character in *Skyrim*, however, does whatever we ask with a robotic level of detachment, which in turn begins to infect us.

One of our early marks spots us lurking and strolls over to say hello. NPCs this stupid deserve to be killed



And yet, perversely, this is actually part of *The Elder Scrolls'* appeal. *Skyrim*'s unpatronising approach to morality and the shallow nature of its simulation combine to create an environment where personae – good, bad, evil, helpful, cruel, kind – can be donned and shrugged off on a whim. This is a game in which you can be the noble Thane of Whiterun by day and a murdering highwayman by night. A game in which you can perform fetch quests for the healers at the local temple before sauntering into a tavern and killing any fool brave enough to give you the evil eye. People will thank you or fear you, but they'll forget you too, allowing you to come back the next day to try out a different routine.

The Dark Brotherhood questline taps directly into this sense of a consequence-free environment, allowing you to moonlight as the evil servant of the Night Mother, secure in the knowledge that no permanent stain on your character will be involved. Listening to your fellow assassins joke about previous kills while practising their abilities in the Brotherhood's hidden lair, the sense truly is that you've found a group of enlightened NPCs who see the rest of *Skyrim*'s inhabitants as the playthings you know them to be.

Considering our low-tolerance approach to wrongdoing on the outside, membership of such a group is rather cynical. And to be honest, we do feel a twinge of guilt over our first couple of kills. But the moment one of our early marks spots us lurking in the corner of their room in the dead of night, poisoned dagger drawn, and strolls merrily over to say hello, the guilt evaporates. Frankly, NPCs this stupid deserve to be killed. At this point, genuine remorse would only get in the way of one of *Skyrim*'s best-written, blackly amusing questlines.

Attempting to reconcile your character's split personality is pointless. At one stage, we found ourselves investigating, on behalf of the city watch, the murder of a young woman in one house while simultaneously plotting the assassination of a young lady next door. It's clear that, in terms of making you feel the weight of your actions, or encouraging you to play a character with any sort of defined moral code, the *Elder Scrolls* series has some way to go. Perhaps, in time, it'll get there. For now, however, we'll relish the freedom of being exactly as big a hypocrite as we want to be. ■

Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare 3

Against all odds, in light of what has happened at Infinity Ward since *Modern Warfare 2*, the third game in the series is remarkable. *Modern Warfare 3* is an ending, and one that resists the easy temptation to leave threads dangling. More importantly than that, it's a hell of a package: *MW3* not only maintains the high standards of the series' previous singleplayer campaigns, but offers what feels like the best iteration of *COD*'s world-conquering multiplayer thus far, as well as a thrilling update of the second game's Spec Ops missions and a new Survival mode.

The worst thing you can say about *MW3*'s campaign is that its first half can lapse into *COD* formula, despite several excellent set-pieces, before everything is forgotten in an absolutely bombastic concluding half. Infinity Ward's singleplayer design specialises in giving the firstperson perspective a physical presence – through a peerless use of blur and focus, and the simple expedient of jarring the camera around – and *MW3* once again offers sequences that are exceptional.

An early mission, Turbulence, is set on a plane carrying the Russian president. You're a member of the Russian special forces tasked with his protection, and soon after the mission begins the aircraft is hijacked. During the next few minutes the plane goes increasingly out of control, with everyone inside battered off the ceilings, sides and seats – and then it heads into a nosedive. Have you ever shot terrorists in zero-G before? It's not only a piece of visual and aural magic, with suitcases and enemies crashing about like lottery balls before floating in a queerly peaceful manner as you try to get a bead, but it's one you're always fully a part of. Brief as it is, Turbulence is a brilliantly conceived and executed moment.

Perhaps this is the secret to scripted sequences: where *Modern Warfare*'s direct competitors often over-script the spectacular moments, or worse make them entirely non-interactive, here aspects of control like the ability to walk are temporarily removed and replaced with memorable one-off challenges that the game never recycles. Lining up a shot in that plane is a surreal experience, and IW is smart enough to give you perhaps a minute of doing so, before leaving it at that. Though *Modern Warfare 3* doesn't have an individual mission quite as sustained as *MW2*'s outstanding Gulag assault, it arguably has more individual peaks of excellence that, in the latter stages, pile on at a breathtaking pace. A European beach assault channels that *Medal Of Honor* landing sequence we all know so well, but inverts it with gleaming hovercraft and tanks. There are desperate car chases past ruined monuments; rescue missions that keep on finding new ways to go wrong; frantic assaults on fortified positions; panicked sprints; dirty bombs; even a chase scene involving a Transit van.

Publisher Activision
Developer Infinity Ward/ Sledgehammer Games
Format 360 (version tested), PC, PS3
Release Out now

A European beach assault channels that Medal Of Honor landing sequence we all know so well, but inverts it



Taken as a whole it doesn't quite live up to the original *Modern Warfare*'s outstanding campaign – but it gets closer than it has any right to. It's let down by a few uninspiring urban shootouts early on, and one proper howler: the game's 'No Russian' moment is a schmaltzy London-based sequence that really should have hit the cutting-room floor. There are other clunkers in the script, but not many, and everything can be forgiven for Blood Brothers, a mission that sees *MW3* at its narrative height – and it's because you care, to a degree you may not expect, about the characters IW has crafted and brought to life over this series. *MW3*'s singleplayer ends up just as memorable as what has gone before, not least because it ties everything up in a finale of supreme catharsis – and restraint.

In multiplayer there are significant changes, the most noticeable being how much slower sprinting feels. Weapon weight is now a factor in how your character moves, and the removal of perks like Lightweight means that movement isn't as lightning-quick as in previous *COD*s. For a minute it feels like running in treacle; after that, you realise *COD* was always a tiny bit too fast.

The second major change is a choice of strike package – in *MW* and *MW2*, killstreaks were the only game in town, and in the latter's case seemed to only entrench the dominance of the best players. Your 'pointstreak' can now be channelled towards Assault, which is the familiar killstreak system, or Support, in which the rewards are initially geared towards helping your team, but your pointstreak doesn't reset if you die.

There's even a third option, unlocked after a significant bout of levelling, and clearly intended for real pros. The Specialist package unlocks additional perks with every two kills, and you can set the order in which they are granted – the most we had going at one time during review was seven, but skilled players can presumably add perks until they end up like the Terminator. Finally, the change from 'killstreak' to 'pointstreak' really has a point: in objective-based game modes, points count towards your streak progression. Capture enough flags: get a gunship.

These are interesting changes, not only because they've clearly been made with a huge audience of highly differentiated skill levels in mind, but because they show that massmarket game design doesn't mean dumbing down. Multiplayer has become more accommodating for everyone, and it makes *COD* better: how many players regularly clock up 15+ kills without dying? Controlling an attack chopper was a distant dream for most in *MW2*'s multiplayer; in *MW3* it's not easy, but it is attainable.

A generous 16 maps exist, moving through a diverse range of scenery and styles, from tiny and frantic clutches of desert to expansive villages and intricate



LEFT Among the new perks: Marksman, which makes it easier to identify enemies at a distance; Quickdraw, for faster aiming down the sights; and Stalker, for faster movement while aiming. **BELOW** The riot shield makes a welcome return in multiplayer, and is one of the most perfect matches for the Support package – you're always dying, but constantly accumulating points





ABOVE Outpost is a Siberian facility perfect for the Kill Confirmed matchtype, thanks mainly to the tempting dogtag-laden walkways that offer little protection from bullets for those brave enough to use them



packing-crate mazes. Resistance, an early favourite, is a Parisian suburb that fits the new Kill Confirmed matchtype perfectly – killed enemies drop dogtags that need to be collected for the score. This leads to intense standoffs where ten dogtags lie in a crossfire zone, with daring players darting in to grab one or two before adding their own to the pile.

Downturn's even better, a street-level fight through a bombed-out urban area with an underground choke point that's an absolute killer in Domination mode – the central flag appears in the pit, and we play matches that end up with an endless loop of slaughter around it. Carbon's wire fences are visually tricky but totally porous, while Arkaden maintains a minor series tradition of fantastic airport levels. London even gets a look-in, with Underground offering a long and looping system of walkways and camping spots.

Then there's Spec Ops and Survival mode (see 'Survival horror'). Spec Ops was *MW2*'s best surprise, a different angle on campaign events for co-op play, and *MW3*'s take doesn't disappoint. Things start off gently with a run through a target-filled training course, before you're thrown straight into hostage rescues, kidnappings and balls-to-the-wall firefights against the sort of overwhelming odds that are just too nasty for singleplayer. Again there are 16 of these missions, and they keep up the trick of revisiting key campaign events from the different perspectives. How about playing that plane sequence, for example, as one of the hijackers?

In the original *Modern Warfare*'s most celebrated mission, All Ghillied Up, you play a young Lieutenant Price following the lead of Captain MacMillan as the pair sneak through Chernobyl. It's an atmospheric stealth sequence and, as you crawl through the high grass, MacMillan's feet are constantly moving in and out of view. They're mo-capped beautifully, pushing up from the forefoot for purchase then sliding back horizontally as his body eases forwards with minimal disturbance – it's a little detail that says everything about the character. Towards the end of *Modern Warfare 3*, you follow central character Soap while in control of Yuri, a new member of the now-disavowed Taskforce 141. As you crawl behind him through a wrecked urban environment, the situation couldn't be further away from high grass and ghillie suits – but Soap's feet move with exactly the same motions as MacMillan's. It's a reuse of a mo-cap asset, sure, but more than that it's a through line: MacMillan to Price to Soap. A visual link, and a piece of ambient narrative.

It's funny to think that when Infinity Ward made *Modern Warfare* it didn't have a mo-cap studio, relying instead on the loan of another company's setup. Four years on and that's certainly changed, but the animation of those feet lingers: a piece of heritage, both in the game and for the game. And Infinity Ward may have changed too, but its standards haven't, delivering a consistent 60fps, zero controller latency, explosive set-pieces, robust multiplayer and military characters you actually give a damn about.

Wherever *Call Of Duty* goes from here, Infinity Ward's *Modern Warfare* trilogy stands as this generation's defining FPS series – and *Modern Warfare 3* is an emphatic, feature-packed and sometimes stunning final act.

9



SURVIVAL HORROR

Survival mode is a new addition to Spec Ops, and offers wave-based co-op in any of *MW3*'s multiplayer maps as well as its own levelling system. It's hard to shake the feeling that this is Infinity Ward's attempt to one-up Zombies, the only thing Treyarch's *COD* games have over the *Modern Warfare*s, and the comparison doesn't do it any favours: it shares that mode's biggest flaw, for one, which is a terribly slow start to each level. By perhaps the tenth wave things are hectic enough, but until that point it feels like it's labouring in first gear. It's great for new players, however: playing Survival mode teaches you the maps inside out, and gives some idea of the best and worst positions to stand and fight. And there's no doubt that raising the difficulty, which on Veteran leads to more-or-less one-hit kills, will give this significant shelf life for the hardcore.

***COD* doesn't get enough credit for its script or voice acting, which straddle both military jargon and 'bro' lines, but keep the ridiculous moments grounded and the twists shocking. It also does a great line in black humour**

Post Script

What does it take to make the biggest series of them all?

Halfway through *Modern Warfare 3* you play a mission entitled Return to Sender. It brings to mind another American icon, and the only question that matters in the big-budget FPS genre: if 50 million Elvis fans can't be wrong, what about *Call Of Duty*'s 90 million?

You can argue over this console generation's best FPS, but there's no doubting the biggest. In the four short years since *Modern Warfare* turned a successful series into a globe-conquering phenomenon, so much has changed. When reviewing *Black Ops* we commented that the annual releases were beginning to feel like Groundhog Day, and with hindsight that's not least because every release smashes sales records again, inexorably moving the series to ever-greater heights.

What should terrify Activision's rivals most, however, is not how influential *Modern Warfare* has been on the design of the modern shooter – online, at least. It's how adept Activision has been at absorbing influences from its competitors, and using them to push *COD*'s reach and structure even further.

The most obvious manifestation of this comes with *MW3*'s release: COD Elite, surely the first dedicated 'platform' for a console game, a hybrid of in-game hooks and social networking that threatens to be the future for gaming's most successful brands. But consider where Elite came from.

In the same issue of **Edge** that *Modern Warfare* scored 9, *Halo 3* picked up a 10, and the difference was partly down to Bungie's pioneering integration of editing and social tools throughout the campaign and multiplayer. Where *Modern Warfare* offered an expertly engineered online experience, *Halo 3* offered the same but with more context: Bungie.net has had profile syncing since the days of *Halo 2*, but with *Halo 3* videos, screenshots, heatmaps and further social features gave the playerbase a support network. With Bungie Pro, dedicated players can buy extra storage and other fillips.

Why is all this important? Because where *Halo 3* led, Call Of Duty Elite has followed – and it's done a much better job of following up than *Reach* or the lacklustre Halo Waypoint. This is the terrifying thing about Activision's stewardship: not that, as the Internet would have it, it's a relentless profiteer, but that it has absorbed the best of the competition and, while doing so, built *Call Of Duty* into a brand that – if you wanted to be heretical – is as big a deal as *Mario*.

It's too easy to be sneery about *COD*, a truly massmarket brand in an industry where commentators are often still uncomfortable with the mainstream. Certainly the series is not beyond criticism, but every problem is often made to seem like a catastrophe. Everything's bigger where *COD*'s involved.

Activision has been adept at absorbing influences from its competitors, and using them to push COD even further



Modern Warfare is responsible for giant swathes of the current and future FPS landscape. Introducing RPG elements, for instance, to a genre where persistence usually means little more than a change in your rank was such a good idea that almost every shooter with an online component now copies it. Few of them also have the good sense to copy *MW*'s default classes, which give you access to higher-level kit from the beginning and make those first few levels of grinding a smoother ride.

But getting caught up in the mechanics and structural influences risks glossing over an obvious, but rarely noted, feature of *Modern Warfare* and *Call Of Duty* in general. Regardless of your opinion of the games themselves, and again contrary to Activision's reputation as the great game industry meanie, in terms of quantity of content and sheer value for money *COD* always over-delivers. It's impossible to say that *MW3* shortchanges its players. Singleplayer campaign, multiplayer with 16 maps, 16 co-op missions and a co-op wave mode add up to a lot of game.

This year's big shooter war has been characterised as '*Battlefield 3* vs *MW3*', but in many ways it's an unfair comparison. The multiplayer experiences of both titles offer a very different take on warfare, and can certainly go toe-to-toe, but as a package there's no contest. If you think *Battlefield*'s relatively weak singleplayer simply doesn't matter then answer this: why did DICE and EA spend millions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of man hours creating it?

The point isn't to bash *Battlefield 3*. It's about what it takes to succeed when constructing a game series that can become a phenomenon like *Call Of Duty*. Every single aspect of your production must be polished to a high shine, and you need more features than your competitors. And in the light of the Infinity Ward saga – which saw a significant proportion of the studio's staff leave under acrimonious circumstances following the release of *MW2* – it's remarkable that *MW3* has maintained these standards, no matter how many resources Activision has thrown at its development.

Few studios are capable of developing a game as polished and feature-rich as *Modern Warfare* or *Halo 3* – but even fewer publishers are capable of providing the kind of structure that lets its community flourish and expand into a phenomenon. After all, which publisher has Bungie chosen to release its first post-Microsoft game? But with that said, let's not lose focus on the important thing: when you're playing *Modern Warfare 3*, it feels like the kind of game its developers would be just as happy to play as they are to make. For all the reasons you can come up with for *Modern Warfare*'s success, perhaps that was the secret all along. ■

Battlefield 3

Be careful what you wish for. Though rightly renowned as the go-to franchise for grandiose online carnage, *Battlefield*'s masters have long had lusty eyes for *Call Of Duty*'s rigidly scripted, gung-ho military fantasy – or at least the money it makes. With *Battlefield 3*, which remains a deliriously brilliant multiplayer experience, DICE has conspicuously touted a singleplayer campaign that is every bit the cinematic spectacle fans of the quasi-interactive man-clicking genre might want, replete with a histrionic, globe-trotting plot about stolen nukes and implausible geopolitical consequences. EA has got what it wanted, certainly, but is that what *Battlefield 3* deserves?

Flashbacks rattle you between roles as a disgraced US marine, a tank driver, an aircraft gunner and a Spetsnaz operative, all embroiled in a threadbare bit of hokum that sees you murder your way through sections of Tehran, Paris and New York. There can be no argument over the scene-setting potency of DICE's efforts in technology and visual design. *Battlefield 3* frequently leaves players slack-jawed with amazement at its compositions, from the ruined Iranian shopping mall, moonlight and rain cascading through its punctured roof on to tiers of collapsed walkways, to the pristine angles of a modernist mansion complex, perched upon a dusky cliff overlooking the Caspian Sea.

Elsewhere, reflections flare and ripple as wind sheers across the deck of an aircraft carrier, light refracting to brightly pepper your visor. Even when unhelmeted, light fragments and bleeds as though you had fitted a smeary Perspex sheet to your face – an odd contrivance that nonetheless creates dazzling, fluid images, the superimposition of colour and texture drawing together the disparate geometries beneath. No war has ever been this beautiful. It even looks the business on the creaky old consoles; on a half-decent PC, it transcends.

But wonderment is not the only reason the player might be left slack-jawed. As kinetic as it all feels, the strict stage-management of *Battlefield 3*'s solo campaign offers so very little room for the player to express independence that its firefights sometimes struggle to keep your attention, despite the superb orchestration of screen-rattling rumbles, whistling bullets and ear-popping explosions. Interaction is largely a trivial adjunct to the game's showreel of pretty flashing lights and sounds, and anything outside its lexicon of bullets is dealt with via a context-sensitive action. Even the decision to equip a weapon you are apparently already carrying is sometimes taken out of your hands. Want to climb a ladder? Go through a door? Walk forward? Not until you are given orders, soldier. So rigid is the scripting that allies can fatally pin you into cover while attempting to follow their programming.

This isn't just an inflexible framework: the gunfights themselves exist in such strictly bounded arenas, and

Publisher EA
Developer DICE
Format 360, PC (version tested), PS3 (also played)
Release Out now



www.bit.ly/uTROLS
Battlefield 3's topics page

No war has ever been this beautiful. It even looks the business on the creaky old consoles



against such suicidal AI, that the player's tactical input is often pared down to a form of whack-a-mole. The vicious punch of each gun is a consolation, but it's nonetheless a far cry from the freewheeling dynamism of multiplayer. While there are exceptions – a push across a heavily occupied valley offers a modest front line to explore – the accumulation of pop-up enemy-clicking and canned animations occasionally leaves you wondering why the game wants you there at all.

The aesthetics carry it, but only just. An abrupt digression into on-rails jet combat leaves you with precious little to do, but it is a searing visual experience: such is DICE's expertise in conveying the material world through keyboard and pad that takeoff had us rolling away from the screen with the G-force. Even the game's most narrowly defined corridor conflicts are densely, artfully drawn, and whether you're fighting a running battle through the streets of Paris or deflecting an ambush in sun-dappled woodlands, the environments express much larger worlds.

The same can't really be said for the game's perfunctory plot. DICE evidently has all the pieces in place to deliver a rich and meaningful narrative experience, but it goes to waste when used only to prop up improbable scenarios for gunfights. With Russians, Americans and Iranians all the hapless stooges of some inexplicably psychotic provocateur, the game does at least manage to skirt some of the dehumanising xenophobia innate to culling scores of mindless foreign wretches. The tone is sober too, without the eager sadism of *Black Ops*, and some of the incidental dialogue is delivered with an underplayed authenticity. DICE has assembled acting talent that lend both their faces and voices to the roles, and with the right opportunity might have been more endearing for it.

Meanwhile, a meaty and varied two-man co-op campaign shares many of the singleplayer's foibles, and some of its locations too. But while you can saunter through solo on normal difficulty, DICE has chosen to make co-op brutally difficult even on its easiest setting. The enemy numbers pose a substantial challenge by themselves, at least until you clock their spawn points on successive replays, but we suspect the major stumbling block will be that progress depends on completing the second mission, in which one of you is asked to fly a helicopter. You don't get to choose which of you plays pilot and who mans the guns, and nor can you swap. As series veterans will know, only a small percentage of *Battlefield* players are able to take off without ploughing into a mountainside, such are the peculiar, capricious and entirely untaught controls.

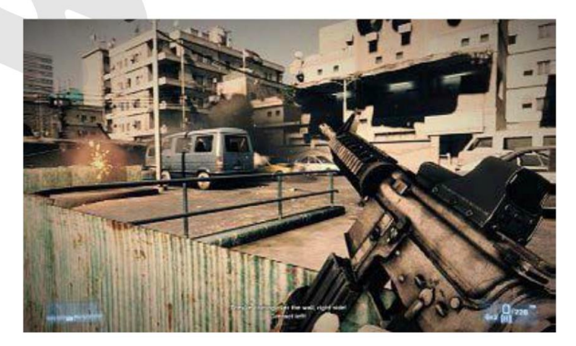
Despite all this, *Battlefield 3* remains as magnificent a multiplayer game as it ever has been, generous in its variety of tactics, inspiring in its scale and riotous in





ABOVE War is waged in places such as Azerbaijan and France, but the locals rarely get a look in. Even in Iran you end up fighting the Russians for reasons not altogether believable. Meanwhile, the French seem resigned to let the US and Russia tear Paris to pieces. **LEFT** The campaign opens on a subway train. The combat opens up a little bit later on, but it doesn't commute to a greater sense of tactical possibility. There is only a handful of flanking opportunities

BELOW Vehicle sections only occasionally put you in control of movement. It never happens during your brief leap to the skies, which precedes the now obligatory infra-red high-altitude bombardment



ABOVE The game deals quickly with the validity of massacring insurgents in Iran and Iraq. "PLR is the right people [to shoot], all right?" says one solider. "They don't make them any righter." Glad that's sorted, then



the collision of vehicles, foot soldiers and aircraft. Even on console, where numbers are shaved from 64 to 24 and the environments trimmed to match, the conflicts feel suitably epic: jeeps careen over hills, rattling off rounds into the sky; tanks churn through streets, punching holes in buildings with the hope of landing a shell in their opponent's tracks; soldiers duck through the chaos, exchanging fire as helicopters prowl above.

As has always been the rule, dying soldiers get recycled in waves of spawns, depleting their team's tickets until one side runs dry. The series-defining Conquest gametype sees players battle for dominance over widely dispersed objectives, the team with fewer flags bleeding tickets faster, while Rush and the smaller-scale Squad Rush see one team defend a linear chain of checkpoints as the other barrels its way through. Though these core modes will be familiar to players of *Battlefield: Bad Company 2*, there is clear advancement, not least in density of environments. Even a setting of extravagant size, such as one horizon-stretching expanse of desert, is lavishly detailed, with players able to turn dizzying scale into tighter conflicts within the intricate outbuildings and refineries.

Players can opt for the sort of game they wish to play, and find some corner of the maelstrom which supports it. This has always been one of *Battlefield*'s strengths, particularly in Conquest, but never has it been so pronounced. The return of jets adds another tier of play, their aerial duelling almost entirely removed from the ground action. DICE's subtle tweaking of the classes allows for more fluid roles, and for each there is a bewildering number of unlockables, allowing you to fine-tune your death-dealing with selected armaments and accessories. The addition of vision-disrupting



ORIGINAL SIN
Origin and Battlelog are the two platforms which act as a dual launchpad for *Battlefield 3* on PC. The former is EA's standalone Steam-equivalent commerce software, the latter DICE's stat-tracking community manager and game launcher which is accessed via Web browser. The interplay between all of these systems seems unnecessarily precarious, and whatever other advantages browser integration brings, who wants Firefox devouring memory when you're trying to play one of the most graphically intensive games currently available? EA's Peter Moore recently described the flaws of this software cat's cradle as "teething issues" – and he's right, but perhaps the publisher should then have started with softer food.

You'd never know your PC doesn't do force feedback, such is the bite of each weapon. Assault rifles dominate, but it's the Spetsnaz op's shotgun that stole our heart, probably just as it turned someone else's to mush

lasers, blinding flashlights and dizzying suppression fire further fills out the repertoire of tactics.

Where this devotion to player choice comes a little unstuck is when it echoes *COD*'s bias towards ground battles. The chokepoints of several Rush maps threaten to stultify, and since the environmental destruction now only occasionally proffers alternate routes, digging out entrenched defenders can be gruelling. The dense Grand Bazaar and Seine Crossing, meanwhile, lend themselves well to the sort of spine-exploding instant death which punctuates rounds in *Modern Warfare*, as canny players will always be able to use the mesh of alleys to locate vulnerable backs. Separate deathmatch modes also cater to such tastes, and though *Battlefield 3* equips itself very well as a twitch shooter and the diversity is welcome enough, it's clear that the game's excellence – indeed, its supremacy – lies in the variety of expression available in its grander conflicts.

This cuts to the centre of our dissatisfaction with *Battlefield 3*'s singleplayer, too. As audiovisually accomplished as any game has been, at least on PC, its deference to prescribed spectacle is an assiduous realisation of blockbuster gaming tastes, with an increasing reliance on 'video' rather than 'game'. EA wants *Battlefield 3* to be all things to all people, and it's right in thinking that the addition of a singleplayer duck shoot doesn't detract from its other substantial offerings. But in this act of imitation, and limitation, it disregards the choice and tactical empowerment which make the series near-peerless and preciously idiosyncratic in multiplayer.

8

Post Script

DICE's narrative ambitions are KIA. But was it friendly fire?

Battlefield's characters are little more than sketches, its plot follows nothing in the way of identifiable logic, and its interrogation-flashback structure, previously seen in *Black Ops*, is nakedly dedicated to getting players from one cool piece of concept art to another any way it can. The writers clearly have such trouble in tying a jet fighter sequence into the narrative that even the characters admit that they don't know what relevance it has to the interrogation. You might call *Battlefield 3*'s narrative a touch throwaway, but what's really being thrown away here is the terrifying amount of money, talent and effort that has gone into crafting something that is ultimately hobbled by the game's overall design.

The failure of its narrative can't really be laid at the feet of the writers, whose work on incidental dialogue is relatively accomplished, not just in recreating a credible military patter but in exploiting the brief moments in which they're permitted to flesh out a character. Equal talent has been expended on the casting, directing and capturing of the performances. The actors have little opportunity to give depth to their roles, but manage it whenever they can. As your squadmate Matkovic (William Meredith) awakes from a hard-won 34-minute nap, he recalls drinking a milkshake in his dream. "That mean something?" he asks with a dopey guilelessness. It's one of the only fleeting glimpses of character you get beneath the tin helmets and flak jackets of your companions.

The wiry Gideon Emery, meanwhile, in taking on the central role of Sgt Henry Blackburn, makes for an unusually riveting CG double. Somewhat haggard, but with a stubborn jutting chin and an honest brow, he is immediately a more appealing protagonist than nearly the entire videogame world's catalogue of gristly man-mountains, where the occasional tasteful scar or tribal tattoo regularly stands in for personality. The cutscenes themselves are composed with flair, from the facial rigging and the smoky lighting, to the detail on each collar and cuff. But you wonder to what end. These scenes will never be more than implausible, hurried bridges between gorgeously dressed slaughterhouses.

Part of the problem is that the military shooter, as it stands as a genre today, is magnificently ill-equipped for narrative. Perhaps that seems odd given that war has supplied us with so many powerful stories, such as Come And See, The Naked And The Dead, Full Metal Jacket, Birdsong, even Blackadder Goes Forth. But, alas, all of these works take pains to reflect on the profound horror and sadness of war, and that hardly feels like the right material for a five-to-seven-hour blockbuster entertainment experience. Even Tom Clancy's yarns of future-war pad out the derring-do with geopolitics and external perspectives – *Battlefield* and *COD* both take a grunt's-eye view, an angle from which political ramifications are never visible.

Military shooters end up shaving away so much context that there's not much left to hang a story on



Invariably, military shooters end up shaving away so much context, both political and personal, that there's not much left to hang a story on. Instead, they hope to pin themselves as action adventures, hoisting the player between spectacular, and often spectacularly non-interactive, set-pieces. The rollercoaster ride works for something like *Uncharted*, where the game encompasses a repertoire of activities and pacing. But, partly because of a grudging debt to realism, the military shooter offers a tale of adventure that limits itself only to the relentless exchange of gunfire.

"I shot a man as he popped up out of cover," *Battlefield*'s imaginary narrator might write. "Then I shot another man as he popped out of cover. Then a man shot at me. Then I ducked down until I felt better. Then I shot a man as he popped out of cover." It's not exactly Norman Mailer. Nor is it even Andy McNab.

It seems that DICE and EA have thrown a great deal of money at a problem they are not really willing to solve. They're paying writers, actors, directors and CG artists to create a pretty little crutch for a genre that has shot itself in the foot. You can speculate at the necessity of it all – does *Battlefield* really need a singleplayer story to compete with *COD*? And why should it need to compete with *COD* at all, except at the behest of EA's bean-counters? Whatever the answer, it seems unlikely to back away from its narrative investments at this point in the franchise. Nor does it seem likely that future games will permit narrative the space to fulfil its potential, or approach its violent setting with even a cursory gesture towards the depth which sustains war stories in any other medium.

With these caveats nailed in place, there remains one other option available for future *Battlefield* games: unhinge the game's gunplay from the rollercoaster ride, and let players have a modicum more freedom in shaping combat. Let them roam the arenas without being rapped across the knuckles for walking too far ahead or to the side. Give them alternative routes, give them the option to close fast with a shotgun or pick apart the defences from afar, give them the tools to solve problems with their own ingenuity, and give them an experience that isn't exactly like every other player's experience of the game. In other words, take a leaf from *Battlefield*'s own multiplayer book. If your military shooter can't muster much of a story, at least let players tell their own. ■

Assassin's Creed Revelations

Assassin's Creed is a series that draws much of its temperament from the character of its protagonist. Under Altaïr, the game was grimy and obsessive, an adventure that felt like mild flagellation as a 12th-century killer pursued targets through a landscape of medieval squalor. With Ezio Auditore in charge, however, Ubisoft's open worlds have been transformed by a knockabout lead bringing a touch of renaissance roguishness to proceedings. Vengeance and backstabbing aside, it's all a bit of a lark to Ezio. There are plots to foil and Templars to silence, but there are also maidens to seduce, and gadgets to test. *Revelations'* final confrontation wouldn't be out of place in one of the stupider Bond films, but it almost works. The Italian's charm is irresistible.

As leading men go, Ezio's the equivalent of a well-travelled and slightly tipsy dinner host: voluble, rangy and devoted to ensuring everyone's enjoying themselves. Three games in, though, it's clear he's also easily distracted. In the Auditore years, *Assassin's Creed*'s narrative has travelled sideways as much as forwards, while the world, which players once complained there was nothing to do in, has expanded greedily, its streets filled with innocents to recruit and bookshops to visit. It's mean-spirited to complain about so much content, particularly in a game where the setting is more important than the plot, but is it always the right content? If anything, being an assassin is in danger of getting lost among all the other trades – international spyrunner, say, or property developer. *Assassin's Creed*'s ancillary systems tend to be thin in execution: levelling up guild members and banking blacksmith profits is rewarding rather than genuinely entertaining, and with a shift to Constantinople, *Revelations* only adds to the distractions.

Like most of *AC*'s cities, Constantinople is huge and hard to learn your way around in the flesh. It's built for speed of traversal rather than tourism, and while it's a delight to scramble over, its monuments struggle to arrange themselves tidily in your mind, leaving you to navigate, as usual, by the clutter of icons on the mini-map. These include a new den-defending minigame that's *Desktop Tower Defense* by way of the 16th century, but it's cleverer than it is engrossing, hampered by mundane units and an awkward view. More importantly, it's another aside in a series that already has plenty; another diversion that obscures rather than enhances.

Elsewhere, *Revelations* is defined by the slightest of incremental improvements. Bomb crafting is smartly implemented as you pick recipes and gather ingredients, and there's an amusing sense that Ezio's behaving as a perky barman rather than a master killer. It's hardly game-changing, though, even if it does give you new options – distract, confuse, destroy – during combat and stealth. The Hookblade, meanwhile, introduces a little complexity to the traversal, allowing you to leap higher and farther and even slide on ziplines. It speeds up both movement and fighting, but it's another minor embellishment; it's still the animation that makes *AC* sing, conveying a majestic blend of agility and effort while you sit back and hold down a few buttons.

As the game swells outwards, the plot becomes thinner. Political rivalries aside, the core of *Revelations* focuses on Ezio's attempt to open a door that's studded with five locks. It's a dangerously direct premise for a 15-hour adventure, and its simple tug can make everything else feel like you're wasting time – a mistake for a series with so many extra-curricular options. At least there's variety. "Everything is permitted," a character says at one point, and they could be discussing Ubisoft's missions, which can segue from pummelling minstrels to picking tulips. It's pleasantly freewheeling, but the core of the game is being gently eroded, and the end result is a narrative that wallows.

Fortunately, the dungeon sections in which you track down the keys themselves are one of *Revelations*' real successes, not just in the manner that they chain platforming together with elegant challenges, but because they provide this wayward game with a sudden burst of momentum. In the caverns beneath Constantinople, there's no armour to repair or landmarks to buy, no dens to defend and no tulips to pick. You simply engage with both environment and gadgets, and make off with a fresh piece of narrative.

Beyond that, *Revelations'* most interesting elements lie outside the campaign, with an expanded multiplayer suite that still hinges on an ingeniously murderous game of hide-and-seek, and some exploration missions as Desmond, who spends the adventure stuck inside the Animus, sifts his past by picking a firstperson path through vast concrete memory palaces. The puzzling is bland – Desmond can conjure platforms at will and interact with a simple range of tractor beams and switches – but the architecture is stark, mysterious and timelessly religious. As an exercise in backstory, it's far more stylish than the Altaïr subquests, in which you go on a brisk tour of the assassin's life while sticking, rather cannily, to a single location.

Revelations? Not really, unless you count a tease for the game's true third instalment. Ending with what amounts to a CGI advert only reinforces the suspicion that Ezio's legacy is an accidental trilogy, the happy by-product of the character's undeniable charm and the publisher's willingness to cobble together mega-teams capable of churning out new locations every year. It's been fun, but it's also been something of a gymnastic dawdle. Unlike the elegant lead, who's grey-haired but unbowed by the end of the adventure, *Assassin's Creed* has been quietly compromised by age.

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Publisher Ubisoft
Developer In-house
Format PS3 (version tested), 360, PC
Release Out now



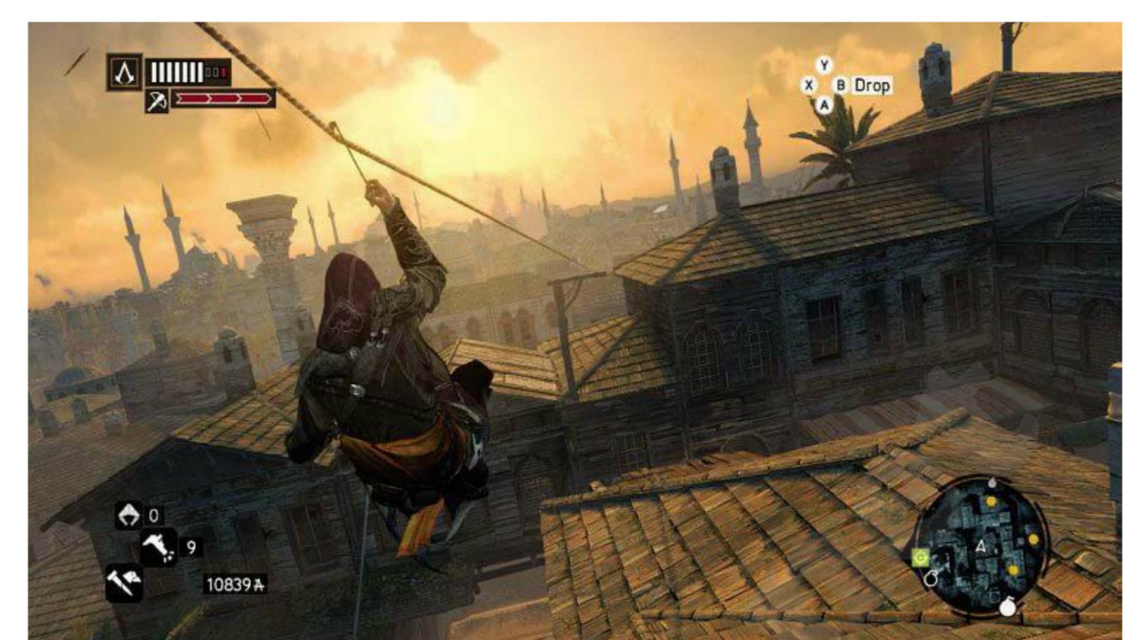
www.bit.ly/pya2Vk
Ubisoft's Falco Poiker on the making of *Revelations*

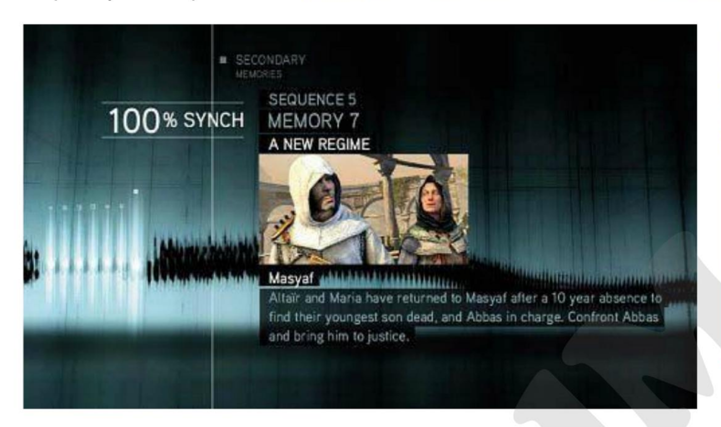
The core of the game is being gently eroded, and the end result is a narrative that wallows



BIRD'S EYE VIEW
Eagle Sense replaces Eagle Vision in *Revelations*, and the major difference is that Ezio is now able to foresee the paths his enemies will take, which show up as lines drawn on the ground. It's a system that's designed to work in beautifully explosive harmony with gadgets like the tripwire bombs, allowing you to create elaborate lures and traps for your foes, and even chain together stealth kills with pleasing regularity.

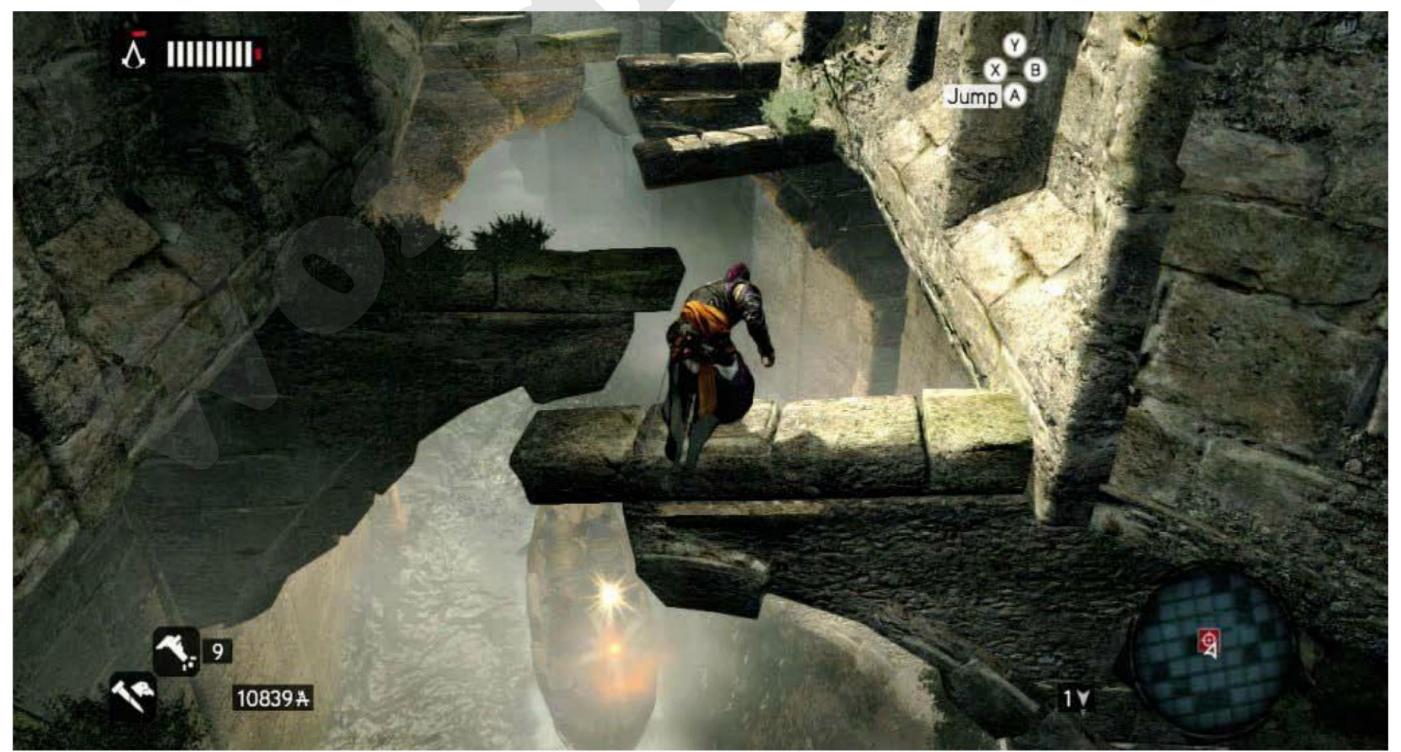
RIGHT Ziplines bring a welcome touch of speed to the rooftops, allowing you and your Hookblade to move swiftly and silently. Even better, you can stop off along the way to assassinate any poor unfortunates lingering below. BELOW Altaïr's inclusion in the game allows the dev team to tie up the loose ends of his story, but his missions are dull and tend to be hampered by weak companion AI



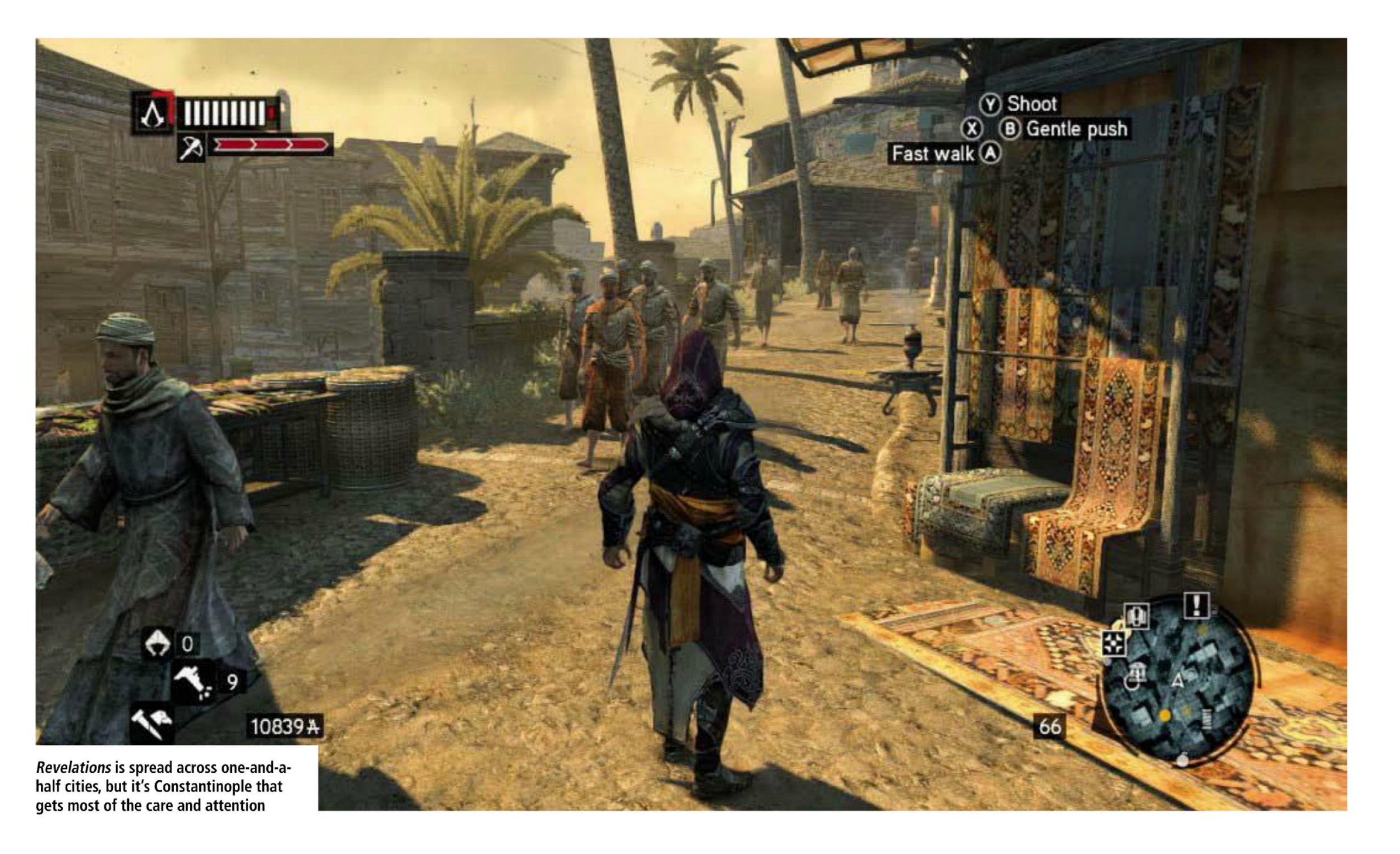




ABOVE Constantinople is a typical *Assassin's Creed* den of intrigue and backstabbing. The characters you meet are elegantly drawn, but the central campaign objective tends to overshadow the local politics



Searching for keys seems to bring the best out of Ubisoft's army of level designers, whether they're chaining platforms together or sending you into the bowels of a giant underwater machine



Revelations is spread across one-and-a-half cities, but it's Constantinople that gets most of the care and attention

Post Script

What can big teams and annual releases do to a game?

At first glance, there don't seem to be many similarities between *Assassin's Creed* and something like *FIFA*. Granted, both feature their share of violence-prone Italians, but there's no offside rule to worry about in Ubisoft's cluttered cities, and there are very few incidents of beggar-shivving when EA strides on to the turf.

On the development side, however, the connections are a little stronger. Ubisoft's open-worlder is an experiment for the French publisher: it's managed to create a costly and elaborate action franchise that somehow sees a new game released every year, with the kind of mechanical regularity usually reserved for sports titles. It's a masterpiece of planning – but at what cost?

And, more immediately, how does Ubisoft do it? The answer to the second question, at least, is relatively easy to pin down. The opening titles for *Assassin's Creed Revelations* list six separate Ubisoft studios – a slow march of credits that is at first funny, and then moderately disturbing. It's not hard to see why the publisher needs such vast resources, either: unlike a *FIFA* or a *Madden*, which can at least rely on the fact that football – American or otherwise – sticks to the same rules each year, Ubisoft must build an entire city from scratch every 12 months, and must throw in a handful of new ideas to provide something to shout about in previews.

For a while, *Assassin's Creed* didn't look like a game that was being made to such a tight schedule, and it didn't look like a game built by committee, either – it had style and imagination. It had personality. It got a lot of that from its star. Ezio doesn't just race through a renaissance metropolis that has been built to his specific metrics (right down to its poky streets, incidentally, which are always just wide enough for him to leap across in a single bound). He provides a charismatic lead for all those designers, scattered around the globe, to focus on. Whether they're crafting haystacks or citadels, ledge grabs or sword parries, they're crafting them for Ezio.

Ezio's still a force to be reckoned with in *Revelations*, but in the concluding game of his personal trilogy, the strain is finally showing. *Assassin's Creed* is beginning to look like a jumble of different ideas and mechanics; a map filled with icons that have been created in isolation. It's fascinating, for example, to see how many of the *Revelations'* minigames could be plucked off the disc and put to work as Facebook apps. Both den defending and assassin management might fare rather well – and with only mildly tweaked interfaces – stuck on a browser tab alongside photos of your sister's wedding. This might simply be down to the fact that both hinge on systemic content, which is cheap to produce and can be endlessly reused, rather than expensive one-shot missions and set-pieces – but it may also have something to do with the fact that both are cheery, time-consuming irrelevances. Both feed back into the main game, but they don't sit within that game harmoniously.

Meanwhile, each sequel's new ideas are getting harder to spot: it's bombs and the Hookblade this time, along with a reworking of Eagle Vision. *Assassin's Creed* is still fiercely entertaining when you're in the midst of a brawl, but such an approach to development seems wearingly similar to *FIFA*'s yearly updates. They're the kind of design decisions you make when you're constantly working on a game, and each release is as much a new content patch as it is a distinct product.

So, what's at stake? Over time, it may well prove to be personality – the single thing that *Assassin's Creed* can never afford to lose. Yearly tweaks can leave you responding to specific criticisms rather than shaping the direction of a game with bold ideas of your own. Here's hoping that, with Ezio finally enjoying retirement, *Assassin's Creed III* can step away from the details and take a slightly wider view. ■

Payday: The Heist

Publisher Sony Online Entertainment
Developer Overkill Software
Format PC, PS3 (version tested)
Release Out now

Our first heist is just minutes old, but already we've seized and bound the bank manager, taken his key card and retrieved a stash of pyrotechnics and a saw. That saw is now buzzing away on a gate that will lead us through to the vault, which we'll access by burning a hole through the floor above. While we wait we fend off an advancing assault team, tipped off by a silent alarm and covering their entrance with smoke, crashing through windows, and sniping from across the street. Through the staccato bursts of gunfire and tersely barked commands, one thought persists: why haven't we played this before?

We have, of course, in the zombie-infested perpetual night of *Left 4 Dead*. But despite this obvious influence, *Payday: The Heist* surprises by feeling so utterly new. Hollywood influences are also a given, and worn on Swedish developer Overkill's sleeve: a running outdoor battle with police after a heist gone wrong, so clearly inspired by one of the movie industry's most revered shootouts, is called, with a blunt and endearing honesty, Heat Street.

As well as being a novel take on the co-operative survival shooter, *Payday* is an ever-increasing rarity: announced out of the blue at E3 and released in the same calendar year. Still, there have been hiccups along the way – it had already slipped from its planned release in early October, and its European PSN release was delayed for a further two weeks.

The nagging concern that it was rushed out of the door to meet its revised ship date is proven right the longer you spend with it. While there's no need for a tutorial in a game with so obvious a goal and *Call Of Duty*'s controls, what's lacking is a thorough explanation of the various functions of the right trigger (context-sensitive prompts do pop up, but you later learn that it can also be used to spot guards and give orders to AI companions). There's no guide to the unlock system, with completed challenges allowing upgrades across three discrete skill trees, selectable in realtime with two button presses. While there are some onscreen prompts, mission-critical information is passed on by teammates or Bain, the faceless, remote puppeteer who calls the shots throughout. In the midst of a firefight, when you and your real-life companions are making enough noise working together, the game's reliance on vocalised direction proves a design liability.

The lack of polish shows in facial models, present on hostages but largely hidden elsewhere by companion clown masks and enemy armour. Running animations are similarly basic, perhaps a factor in the police's preference to engage from distance. Excellent sound design makes up for such visual compromises, with a hefty crackle to gunfire and a musical score that builds along with the action, one level's squelching house track quickening the pulse as the action builds.

Despite its obvious influences, Payday: The Heist surprises by feeling so utterly new



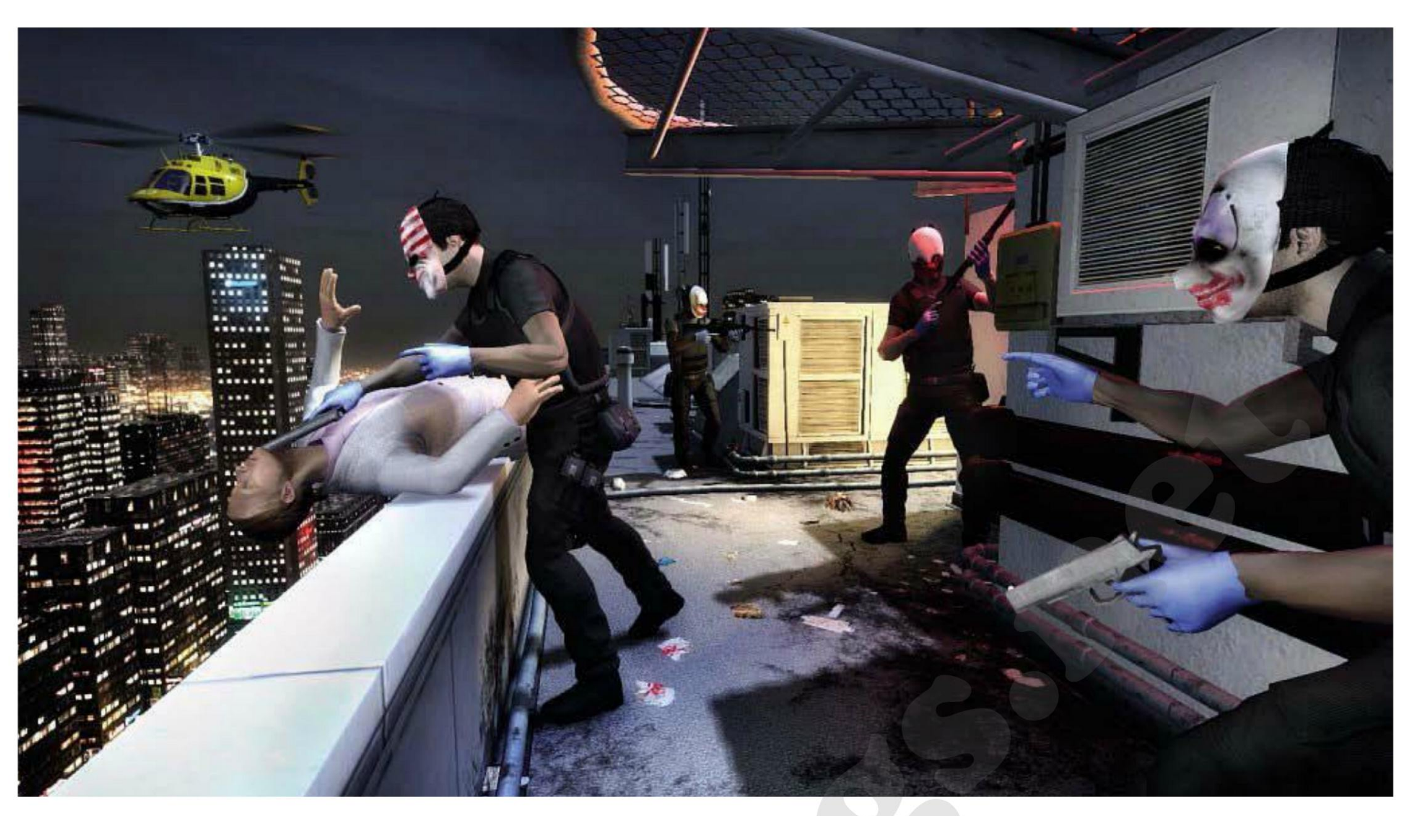
The game's six stages toy with the formula to ensure variety, with your team stealing a panic room wholesale from a drug den, escorting prisoners across what remains of a recently exploded bridge and, most memorably, sneaking undetected – in theory at least – through a high-rise building to pilfer a stash of diamonds. While all six are available from the off, the final two are only available on hard difficulty and above. Which is where things begin to fall apart.

Even on normal difficulty, *Payday: The Heist* is hard. So too, we imagine, is robbing a bank, but you'd expect Overkill to cut players some slack in the name of escapism. Police attack in waves, with little respite in between – barely enough for a mad dash to replenish ammo that, commendably, is just scarce enough throughout – but those waves will keep coming until you complete an objective and trigger the next bit of scripting. It's often hard to tell exactly where you've been hit from, and the game enjoys telling you the police have been fended off, only for a couple of stragglers to pop out unannounced while you stock up on munitions or reset saws which, given their propensity to conk out numerous times over the course of a mission, were apparently bought on the cheap.

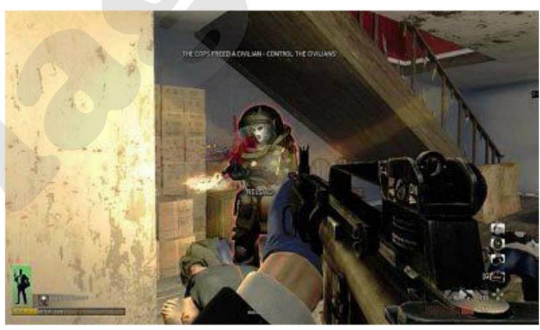
AI companions are reasonable marksmen and fine spotters, but seem loath to complete objectives, and have been programmed to revive you when downed irrespective of the number of surrounding enemies, meaning you'll often rise into a hail of gunfire holding a pistol that you emptied while on the floor. With friends like these, those difficulty-restricted later missions are barely worth bothering with. Assemble a team of human companions, however, and the game shines. With a proper team of four working together, maps committed to memory and loadouts effectively coordinated, *Payday*'s niggling flaws fade into irrelevance and the game finally makes good on those initial glowing impressions. Singleplayer is largely pointless: enemy numbers scale appropriately, but one knockdown means death.

Despite its delays, the PS3 version teemed with connectivity issues at launch, and while matchmaking appears much improved by a day-two patch, the relative lack of PSN players with headsets will hamper your team's progress. It's still early days for the PS3 release, but its popularity on PC suggests that, once players realise the importance of voice chat and true co-operative play, the console version will thrive accordingly. Overkill couldn't, for whatever reason, give *Payday* the development time it needed for its rough edges to be sanded down, but it remains a game with great potential. Whether that potential is to be realised depends on whether players are prepared to give it the time the studio could not.

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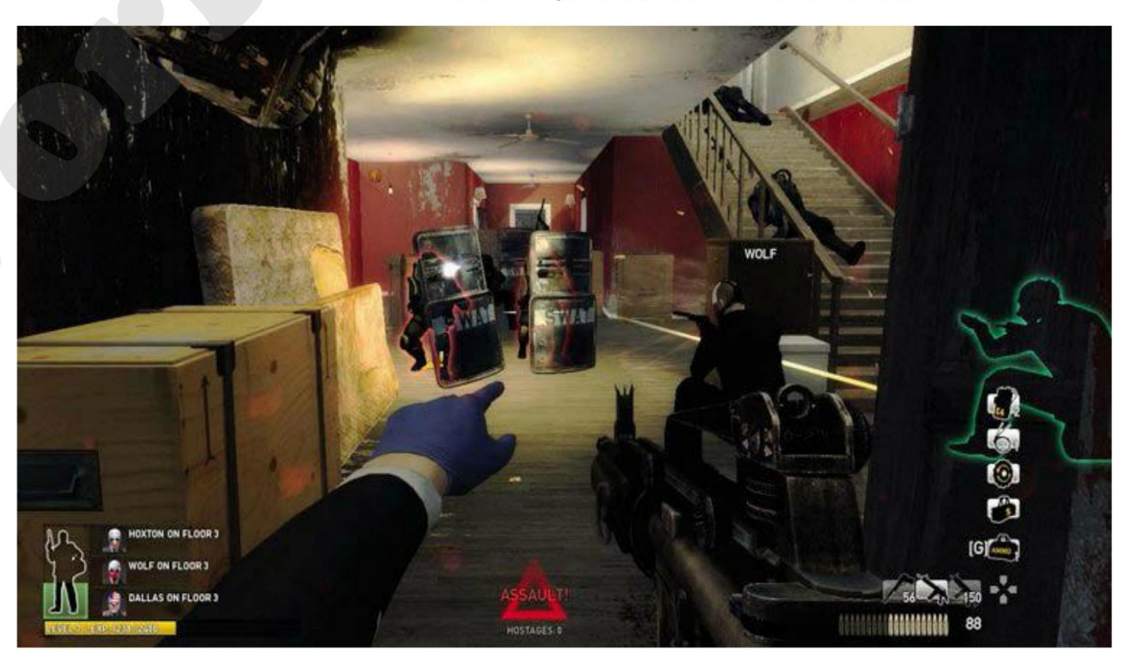






ABOVE The shotgun-wielding Bulldozer is no match for concentrated fire and sensible use of cover. The biggest threat is the Cloaker, who melées and cuffs one of your number, then waits to do the same to rescuers

TOP Civilians can be bound with cable ties and taken hostage. When a police wave ends, any captures can be exchanged for teammates you've failed to revive and have been taken into custody
ABOVE It'll likely be a few hours before you fire your first SMG. Progress early on is glacial, as the difficulty and your low level restrict you to repeat plays of the first few missions, and you can't pick up weapons from downed enemies.
RIGHT Enemies with riot shields rarely come in pairs. They need to be flanked, and serve to highlight the flaws in the companion AI: teammates prefer to stay close to you, in case you need reviving



Rayman Origins

Michel Ancel's limbless, Fraggle-esque creation has long struggled to match the charisma of his platforming contemporaries, but it's fair to say that Rayman exudes far more charm as a 2D sprite than he does built from polygons. And the first proper *Rayman* game in six years, *Origins*, is a bounding, joyful and unapologetically old-school 2D platformer.

It's beautiful, too, Ubisoft Montpellier having created a lavish, painterly look for the game that's nothing short of luxurious. There are more layers of parallax scrolling here than we can count, lending the game's worlds convincing depth and providing an occasional change of track as you leap into or out of the screen. At 1080p, the game's vibrant palette sings.

Despite such striking visuals, your early reaction to the game will likely be a world-weary sigh as jungle, ice desert and lava levels make an appearance. Levels are split into short segments in which you must negotiate twisting obstacle courses while collecting Lums – the series' perennial collectibles – and rescuing trapped Electoons. Saving enough of these small, pink creatures unlocks new levels in the game's hub world and additional playable characters – including Globox and a selection of teensies – housed in the Snoring Tree.

The game's penchant for high-speed action is put to good use in chase sequences. The spectacular soundtrack deserves special mention too, equal parts catchy and melancholic, and performed by a real orchestra

Publisher Ubisoft
Developer Ubisoft Montpellier
Format 360 (version tested), PS3, Wii
Release November 25



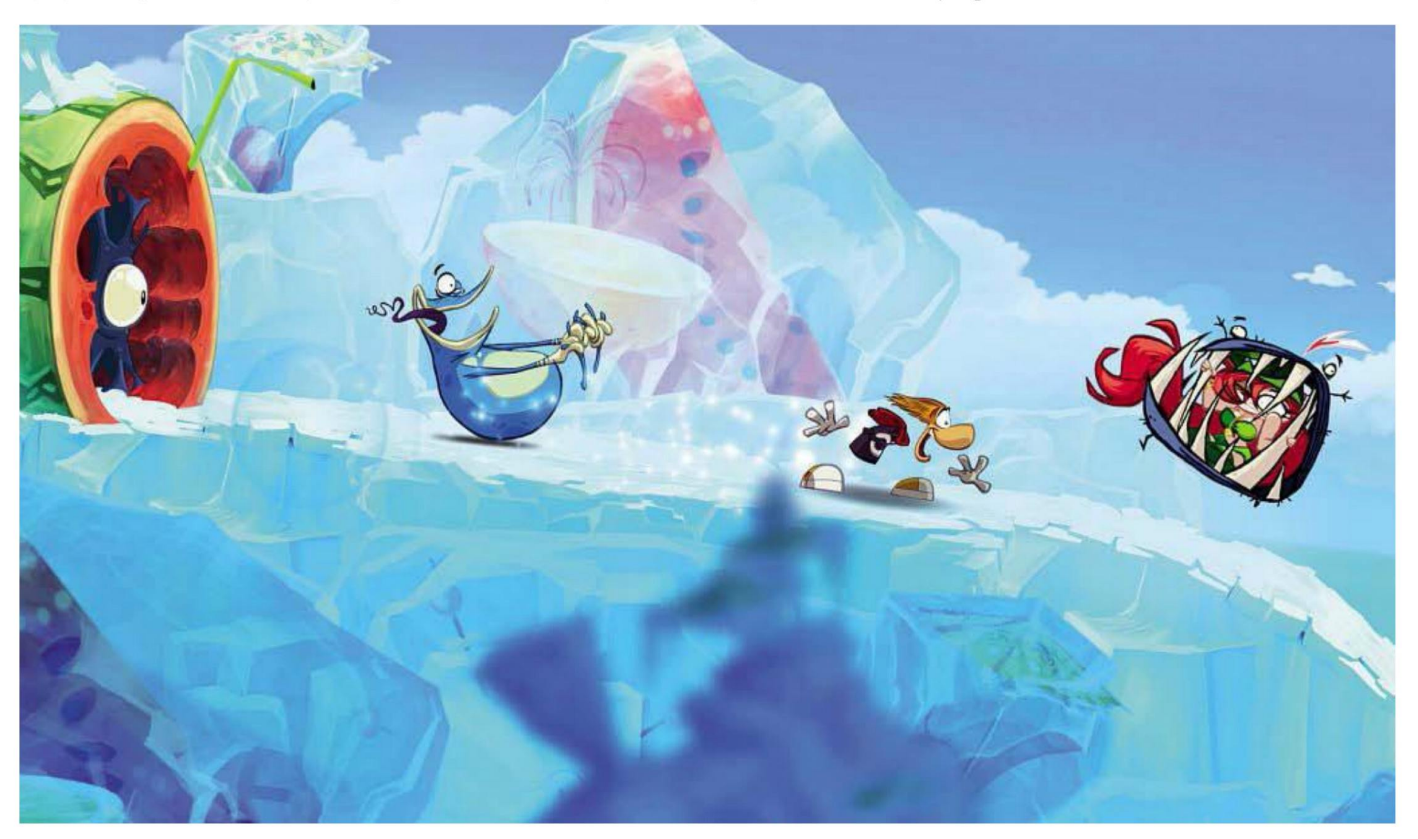
FOUR NAUGHT
Origins supports drop-in/drop-out play for up to four people, and you can choose to be any character you've unlocked in the singleplayer game. However, other than the simple pleasure of playing with friends (and punching them in the face), there are no challenges that take advantage of the additional hands, and no differing abilities among players. Thus, the three extras rapidly begin to feel like they're playing bit parts to the starring turn.

Stick with it, though, and it becomes clear that Ubisoft has stamped its own signature on the genre's well-worn clichés. The desert, for instance, is brought to life with a musical theme that sees you careening through giant didgeridoos, bouncing on drum skins and adding to the soundtrack through your actions. Ice and lava, meanwhile, are juxtaposed to great effect as the former's cool-blue hues and speedy gameplay clatter into the more careful platforming of the latter over fiery vats drawn in rich oranges and reds.

New abilities are gained quickly, and once Rayman is able to attack, fly and run on walls he becomes a joy to control. The perfectly judged inertia and rollercoaster routes of later stages bring memories of golden-era Sonic rushing back, and the frequency of new ideas and spectacle occasionally makes us think, dare we say it, of Treasure.

In a world whose sales charts are regularly topped by ever-more-homogenised military shooters and action games, playing *Origins* feels like stepping into an alternate reality in which the 16bit era evolved by increasing in fidelity, not dimensions. So while Mario continues to make us reconsider 3D space and Sonic makes us reconsider buying any games that feature him nowadays, it's left to Rayman to uphold the big-name 2D platformer. Going on this evidence, the genre is in very capable disembodied hands indeed.

8



PixelJunk SideScroller

Central to the appeal of the *PixelJunk* series is its developer's ability to do a lot with a little. *SideScroller*, after all, sees Q-Games conjuring scorched subterranean caverns, throbbing pink intestines and even toxic celestial clockwork from a handful of coloured vector shapes, and grinding an endless supply of tactical choices from just three basic weapon types – although, granted, they can all be upgraded. It's thrifty stuff, and it's mesmerising too.

Also, it really, really wants to be an arcade game, from the moiré lines and hint of a curved screen that have been layered on top of the playing field, to the prompt to 'insert coins' that greets you on the start menu. It's got the chops for it too, invoking classics ranging from *Gradius* right back to a weaponised *Lunar Lander*, while its tumbling waves of enemies could have spawned from the depths of *Galaxian*, or in the dark heart of *R-Type*.

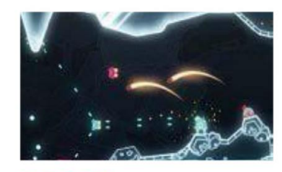
But if Q-Games has crafted a consummate genre piece, it's one that is neither merely stylish nor nostalgic. Instead, it's willful, personable and tricksy, and it has plenty of distinct *PixelJunk* DNA swimming around inside it too. Those three weapon types are riddled with interesting strengths and weaknesses – the machine-guns offer steady streams of fire but can't lance straight through enemies like the slower laser can – and they all require a commitment from the player in order to use them properly.

The environment, meanwhile, is much more than a static backdrop, as later levels throw in pools of lava or toxic bile and chunks of shimmering ice. Smart lifts from *PixelJunk Shooter* mean you can cool your ship down after you've taken too much damage by steering through a nearby waterfall, while a no-fuss combo system draws you back to the action by encouraging kill chains to keep your multiplier alive. It's push-pull gaming executed with beautiful economy, and it's typical of the clear-headedness with which the whole thing's been put together.

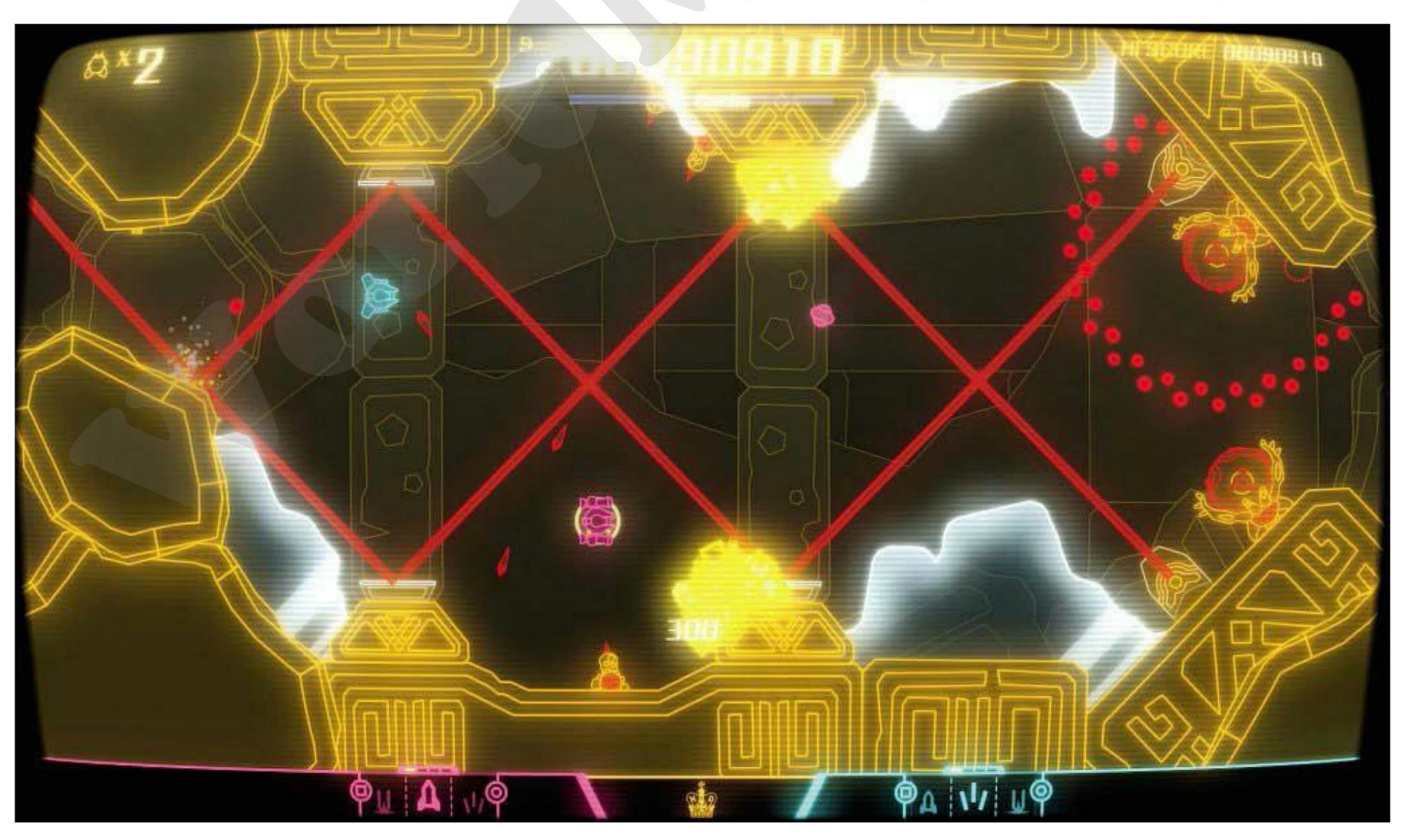
SideScroller's final stages are arguably among the best things Q-Games has ever done, but be warned: if you're used to the puzzley pace of *Shooter*, you won't find its playful nature here. Arcade games aren't about playfulness anyway: they're about endless suffering made palatable by the hope of eventual mastery. They're about wading into bullet hell until you've found that one safe vantage point, about collectibles that are literally invisible until you stumble across the cranny where they've been hidden, and about locking you into a spinning kill chamber and then piling on the homing rockets. Insert coin? You really should.

8

Publisher SCEE
Developer Q-Games
Format PS3
Release Out now



THE FLOOD
Fluid dynamics provided the backbone of *PixelJunk Shooter*, helping to turn an exploratory action game into a wonderfully complex and surprising puzzler. With *SideScroller*'s faster pace, materials like water and lava are still tied into the cooldown mechanic, but they're more likely to play a role in combat. From magnetic pools of toxic goop to blockades of slushy ice, *PixelJunk* hasn't lost its love of physics – it's merely found a new way of expressing it.



High Frequency Bandwidth is back on musical duties, providing a touch of calm to the frantic arcade battling. *SideScroller* fits into the *Shooter* universe in some playful ways, but there's no doubting the lineage anyway

The Adventures Of Tintin: The Secret Of The Unicorn

Platforming is the beating heart of Ubisoft's crisp, charming riff on Spielberg's recent film. The subtlety and nuance of the cast's movements, from daring leaps to nose-smashing right-hooks, is an artistic delight that keeps the sidescrolling action consistently engaging, even if it does turn out to have more ideas than its slender runtime can cope with.

While the movie taps into the nostalgia vein of Hergé's original comic strip, the game feeds from the memory of traditional platformers. A gorgeous act set in the Middle East recalls Virgin Interactive's *Aladdin*, and there are shades of Chair's *Shadow Complex* in the multi-tiered levels and use of three-dimensional models on a 2D plane. Levels are short, simple and sweet: flick switches, raise platforms and knock the stuffing out of goons who are often looking the wrong way. There's a sense of style over substance, but it's so breezy and light-hearted that you may not care. This is a movie tie-in not strictly for fans, a sightseeing trip around a beautiful world accessible to all ages.

That world is drawn to life with a retro chic that captures the film's look carefully and faithfully. The understated architecture and character designs keep your objectives clear at all times, removing the need for laborious signposting as you leap and bound across the hallways, caverns and palaces of the jet-setting yarn. Your journey through the tale is slammed to a halt only when Ubisoft Montpellier tries to mix things up.

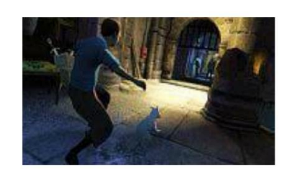
Rote grappling-hook sections, camera-challenged plane flying and tedious flashbacks to shipboard swordfighting muddy the experience. The intention may be to steer you away from boredom, but the irony is that the team employs enough tricks as it is; dynamic camera shifts, underwater cave dives and miniature set-pieces that have you outrunning impending doom all serve to adequately break up your side-on travels.

A further attempt at variety comes in the game's co-op mode – a bizarre trip into Captain Haddock's subconscious providing a playground for the designers to escape the stricture of the movie's plot, even if it is a tedious game of switch-flicking and crate-pulling. It's a rabbit hole of silliness geared towards collecting outfits for the lead characters. If the challenge was heightened and the rewards more encouraging (though admittedly Tintin's giant head mode is a gimmicky treat), it might have added the longevity the package sorely lacks.

For the majority of Tintin's adventure you'll be happy to kill time hopping and skipping across its gorgeous stages, but unlike the contours of Hergé's timeless stories, there's no hidden treasure to be found beneath its dazzling veneer.

6

Publisher Ubisoft
Developer in-house
Format 360 (version tested), PC, PS3, Wii
Release Out now



MULTIFORMAT ADVENTURES

This isn't the first time Tintin has made the jump to games. In 1987, Infogrames brought him to various platforms in *Tintin On The Moon*. A mix of platformer and shooter sections, its structure and commitment to variety has more than a passing resemblance to Ubisoft's offering. Infogrames' next stab, in 1995, was less successful: *Tintin In Tibet* captured the cartoon series' style but it played like a dog.



You'll rarely have to outrun your opposition; a few taps of square will knock down anyone you come up against, while all manner of objects – from suits of armour to beachballs – can be used for slapstick effect

Sonic Generations

Commemorating its star's 20th birthday, *Sonic Generations* is a reminder of both what you adore and abhor in a series that's had its simple joys diluted by flash-in-the-plan iterations and ideas.

A number of stages from the series have been given a lick of current-gen paint – from *Sonic The Hedgehog*'s Green Hill Zone to more contemporary settings like *Sonic Adventure*'s Speed Highway – and progress requires you to tackle them as either Sonic's past or present self. As retro Sonic, stages play out in a traditional side-on view, while contemporary Sonic goes on a slightly different route with the more aggressive, unpredictable camera and speed of recent titles.

It's a game of two halves, then, and while you have autonomy over which Sonic you select, this freedom isn't mirrored in your navigation of the levels themselves. With the exception of experiments like *Sonic Adventure* and *Sonic Chronicles*, the spiky one's stages have always been linear, but in *Generations* the added detail and onscreen activity can make progress fatally disorienting and stuttering, as a barrage of fore- and background detail clouds your vision. The razzle-dazzle of Sonic Team's tech may add visual flair, but it comes at the cost of your sense of empowerment, too often feeling like a game of pinball as you hold the analogue stick and hope for the best, occasionally tapping a button (and even these moments tend to come with prompts). A further frustration is the requirement to use both Sonics to unlock new worlds.

While the levels are strict and narrow, their hub is confusing in its openness. Each entrance is a miniature platformer in itself, comprising challenge gates that are too often hidden in awkward places. The few boss battles add to the burden, and suffer from poor camera placement and cruel mid-fight difficulty spikes.

Still, beneath the technical failings – including some disappointing framerate fluctuations – Sonic Team's passion shines through. Plenty of extras are on offer, from a music library to a playable classic (see 'Take you back'), and some of the challenge gates provide short, sharp bursts of fun that capture the mischievous tone of the rogue runner's finest adventures.

Generations at least offers a passing glimpse of Sonic's early days, where sprinting and platforming offered a balanced, reaction-based gameplay rhythm. The rest, however, is best viewed as a document of how Sega has struggled to stay true to that original template, and toggling between the old and new is a painful reminder of where Sonic went wrong. Instead of the sweet chords of nostalgia, Green Hill Zone's chirpy tunes sound like a fanfare for the departed.



Publisher Sega
Developer In-house (Sonic Team)
Format 360, PS3 (version tested), Wii
Release Out now



TAKE YOU BACK
The option to purchase the original Mega Drive *Sonic The Hedgehog* with in-game points serves to remind you how much cleaner and finely balanced the early entries were. This is just one unlockable of many, and most relate to Sonic's skillset. The option to purchase extra lives, rings and abilities adds to the campaign, and choosing which skills to assign to your limited slots deepens a title that is an otherwise hollow exercise in aesthetic homage.

At its best, *Sonic Generations* breathes current-gen life into some of the series' most iconic scenes. The pain of losing all of your rings thanks to the devilish placement of enemies is as nerve-wrecking as it's ever been



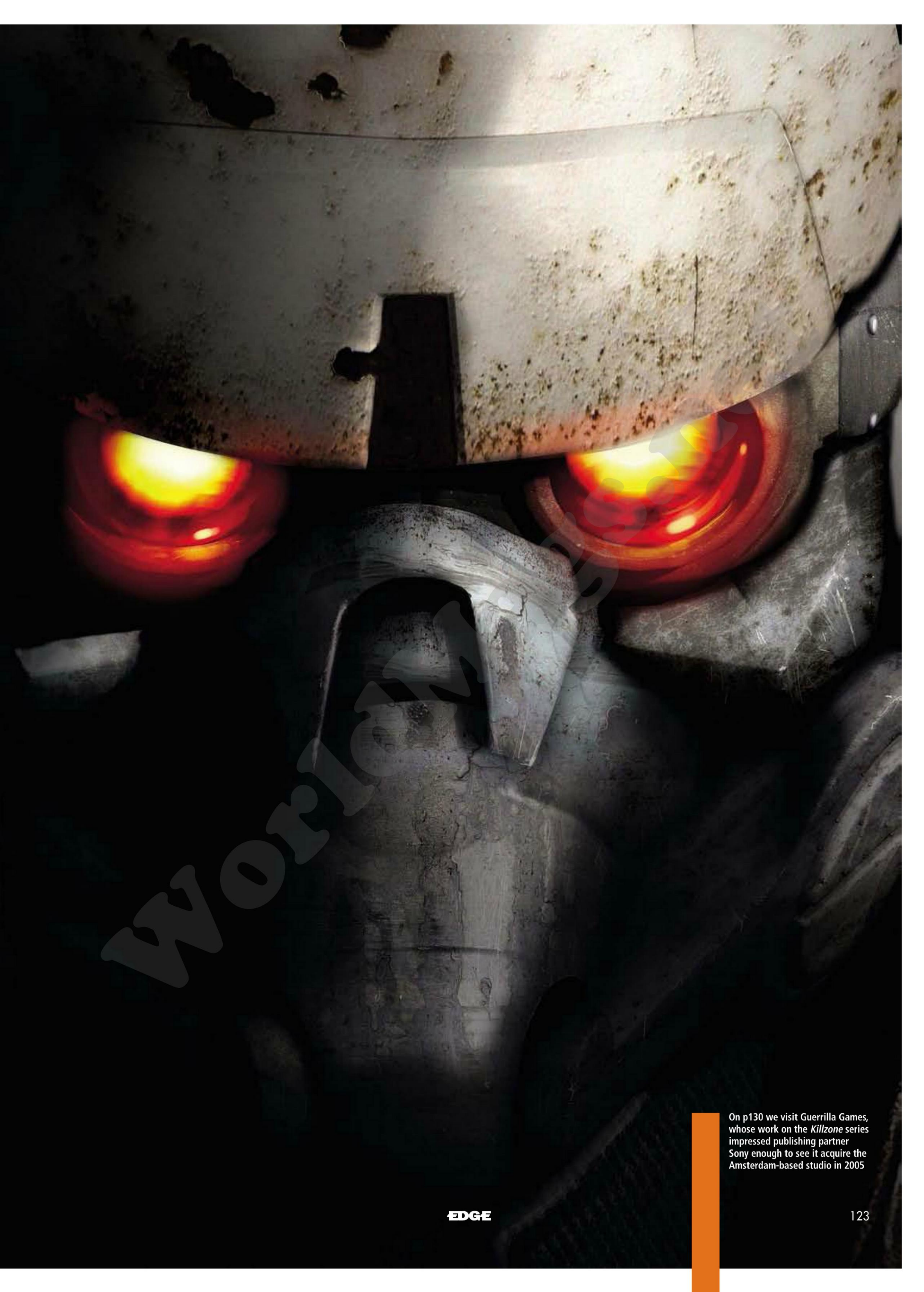
create

Lifting the lid on the art, science, and business of making games

In this issue's People, Places, Things beginning on p124 we meet Richard Lemarchand, Naughty Dog's lead gameplay designer and the man responsible for keeping you dangling over ledges in the *Uncharted* series, as well as *Tinhead*, *Jak 3* and Gex the gecko, among others. On p126 we cross the irradiated wasteland to *Fallout 3*'s Megaton – a town made of scrap and rubbish that nonetheless knows how to make things go with a bang. They've been around since the dawn of gaming, we couldn't have *Pong*, *Super Mario Bros* or even *Deus Ex* without them, and now the humble videogame block is the subject of scrutiny on p128. For Studio Profile on p130 we travel to Amsterdam to meet Guerrilla Games, maker of the *Killzone* series and currently working on a top-secret new project. The subject of this month's The Making Of... on p136 is *Full Spectrum Warrior*, the army training aid that broke ranks and set out on its own videogame insurgency, shaking up the world of military shooters as it did so. Concluding this issue's Create are our regular columnists, with designer Tadhg Kelly (p140) calling for British games to embrace their Britishness and stop pretending to be something else, LucasArts' Clint Hocking (p142) making sure he has the right number of guns, Tiger Style's Randy Smith (p144) wrestling with a gaming world governed by a surfeit of absurd rules, and writer James Leach (p146) practising the art of herding cats while nailing jelly to a wall.



www.bit.ly/jT6wkn
The business section of **Edge**'s Web site



On p130 we visit Guerrilla Games, whose work on the *Killzone* series impressed publishing partner Sony enough to see it acquire the Amsterdam-based studio in 2005



People

RICHARD LEMARCHAND

Uncharted 3's co-lead designer is both engineer and artist

From Oxford, via Microprose and Crystal Dynamics, Lemarchand is a key component of the Californian Naughty Dog

Few studios take narrative craft as seriously as Naughty Dog. Since the inception of its *Uncharted* series in 2006, Sony's California-based outfit has developed a new area of expertise, one focused on collaborating with performance-capture artists, pouring resources into rehearsal time, and expertly integrating story and character into its traditional production process.

Uncharted 3's co-lead designer **Richard Lemarchand** embodies this marriage of art and technicality. He graduated from Oxford with a degree in physics and philosophy, and describes his interests as divided from an early age. "I grew up playing computer games, and I was always one of those kids at school who was very nerdy, very into maths and physics. But I was also always getting up on stage for one reason or another. I think when I was a kid I wanted to be a Tomorrow's World presenter, more than anything else. It was the confluence of technology and entertainment that really excited me."

During a recent visit to London, *Uncharted* star Nolan North joked about another alternative career for Lemarchand, suggesting that his Tom Baker looks might have landed him a spot as the Doctor's understudy. But Lemarchand has more of the David Tennant or Matt Smith Doctors about him, angular English enthusiasts who confound with off-hand knowledge of the intricately technical but also demonstrate scene-stopping emotional intelligence. In a single breath he'll casually reference projective light maps and dynamic physics simulations, before drawing back to explain how these tools service the precise dramatic needs of a particular moment.

"I think it's very important that every designer be part engineer, part artist," he says. "You know our brains have two sides – one is rational, analytical, spatially reasoning, the other intuitive, emotional. And we bring both of those sides to bear on everything we do. It's important that a designer understand the tools that he has to work with. But it's also important he understand how the things he builds will land with people in terms of their total intellectual and emotional experience."

This interest in design led Lemarchand to games rather than Television Centre. "I got back into games after I'd been to college," he says. "The Amiga had just come out so graphics were looking *amazing*. I made a beeline for the careers office, where they told me I didn't have a hope in hell of becoming a games developer, because I have a physics and philosophy degree. Fortunately my mum showed me a job advert in the local paper, the Gloucester Citizen, for a company called Microprose, an American developer with an office in the west of England."

At Microprose, Lemarchand designed two games for Sega's Mega Drive: *Tinhead*, a visually strong post-*Sonic* platformer, and early 3D title *F-15 Strike Eagle II*. A third project was started – another sidescroller, entitled *Boo!* – on which Lemarchand had the opportunity to work with Danger Mouse animator Keith Scoble ("an amazingly talented guy"). Despite featuring on the front cover of The One Amiga magazine, the game was never released, and Lemarchand's subsequent search for new opportunities eventually led to California.

"I saw a job advert in the back of **Edge** for this new studio, Crystal Dynamics, in Palo Alto in the San Francisco Bay Area," he says. "As a young cyberpunk I knew all about Palo Alto. It was the home of Xerox Park, where the mouse had been invented and the graphical user interface had been invented, the unofficial capital of Silicon Valley. I knew that Crystal Dynamics was a company that had been founded with a remit of bringing together great videogame talent with great linear media storytelling talent. They called it 'Siliwood' back in the day – that was the goal, to combine Silicon Valley and Hollywood."

> "Design is about psychology. Who are we? What makes us tick? How do we see the world?"

Naughty Dog's work on *Uncharted* might be the ultimate realisation of this goal, being produced half in-studio, half on the Sony Pictures soundstage. But Lemarchand's time at Crystal Dynamics offered a crucial stepping stone.

The first game on which Lemarchand worked was 3DO platformer *Gex*. But this single-platform strategy had been abandoned by the time he started work on *Pandemonium* for the original PlayStation. "I think that was the world's first game set in a manifold," he says, adding with characteristic meticulousness: "A manifold, for fans of mathematical topology out there, is a 2D plane which is bent around three dimensions."

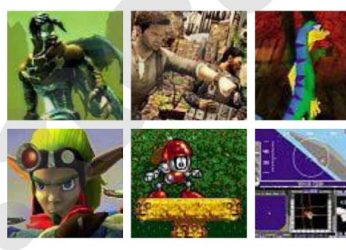
As much as the games themselves, it was the people and approaches Lemarchand encountered at Crystal Dynamics that shaped his outlook. He worked with current Naughty Dog co-president Evan Wells on *Gex: Enter The Gecko*, and then with *Uncharted*'s influential creative director Amy Hennig on the *Soul Reaver* series. Lemarchand credits Hennig in particular with having an "incredible vision, with similar ideals of wanting to bring together the best of interactivity and the best of story to create something special and new."

This is typical of Lemarchand, who is continually name-checking colleagues, sharing credit and generally advertising the joys of creative collaboration. "You have to have fun to make fun," he says, and makes it clear that Naughty Dog is a special place to work, thanks in large part to the influence of Wells and co-president Christophe Ballestra ("Without trying to impose structure on people, they're all about empowering the individual developers at Naughty Dog to do what they know how to do well"). But there's also a sense that Lemarchand is simply an uplifting, positive individual. He remembers during playtesting on *Uncharted 2*'s 'Peaceful Village' level, watching players "rushing straight up to the first NPC that they saw and swinging a punch at them." Convinced the players "weren't truly trying to attack the villagers, they were trying to see if they could interact with them," Lemarchand altered the level so that attacks instead became handshakes, and was gratified by players' delighted reactions.

"At the end of the day, design is about human psychology, and that's a subject that's always been fascinating to me. Who are we? What makes us tick? How do we see the world, and how do we interact with it? To my mind it's really just to do with being inquisitive about everything in life. And that's something I think is incredibly enriching. If you're interested in the world, you really can't help but have a good time in it. And if you're having fun, then it really gives you a good chance of being able to make really good fun. And that of course is the key to game design." ■



URL www.naughtydog.com
Softography *Tinhead, F-15 Strike Eagle II, Gex, Gex: Enter The Gecko, Soul Reaver, Jak 3, Uncharted: Drake's Fortune, Uncharted 2: Among Thieves, Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception*



Places

MEGATON

An outpost crafted from scrap turns out be anything but disposable

A convoluted spectacle with pathfinding to match, Megaton squeezes all the essential landmarks of an RPG hub, plus citizens, into what can't be more than a third of the usual space

From Fallout 3
Developer Bethesda Game Studios
Origin US
Release 2008

The volume of content you can squeeze into a confined space is a constant wonder of videogames. Made out of scrap metal, embroidered with aircraft parts and wrapped around a nuclear bomb crater, Megaton is so called because the bomb never actually went off. It didn't go anywhere, in fact, and seems perfectly happy where it is, being worshipped every morning by the town's resident death cult. Local population: 28 named characters and whoever happens to be dropping by, all living within a screenshot of each other's front door.

Well, almost a screenshot. One notable frustration of Megaton is that you can just about see all of the place at once – the two pubs, church, hostel, townhouses, waterworks, armoury, shop, public toilets and monument to mass destruction – yet never quite get the measure of it. This amphitheatre of NPC behaviours and routines likes to tease your field of vision every second you're inside.



Megaton owes much of its civility to dense scripting, its characters free of the more bonkers antics of the dynamic Wasteland

After the rampart-ridden *Oblivion*, Megaton epitomises *Fallout 3*'s grand adventure in the building of open-world forts. Hardware demands that these Bethesda RPGs feature towns that, the moment you cross that loading-screen threshold, can pack themselves into neat and tidy 'world models'. Those come in all shapes and sizes in the Capital Wasteland, from the aircraft carrier Rivet City to the Pentagon to the commanding Tenpenny Tower, the latter of which might offer a terrific view of Megaton if – perish the thought – it 'accidentally' blew up.

And if, in that realm of extreme possibility, a man (who was never here) approached you in Megaton and spoke (but never had this conversation) about disabling (but also kinda rearming) the bomb, all for the sake of a local landlord's view from his upstairs window, that would surely set up a pretty awesome payload – sorry, payoff – to a videogame moral choice. Never mind the guilt – imagine the mere logistics of some 28 characters, with all their histories and their dialogue and their church and their toilets, not just vanishing from a game but being utterly vaporised by an RPG version of the Hiroshima blast.

Imagine 28 characters, with all their histories and dialogue and toilets, being utterly vaporised

This does, of course, actually happen in *Fallout 3*, during a game-defining quest called The Power Of The Atom; a game-redefining quest, even, if you live in Japan. Nothing quite sums up that country's gaping cultural wounds like the 'defusing' of the Atom quest by the Japanese ratings board (Megaton's renamed bomb is benign in this version, the explosion happening at a nondescript military target elsewhere) in a game that was nonetheless voted one of the top ten RPGs ever by readers of Famitsu. Like Germany and the swastika, Japan seems mesmerised by something it can't quite countenance in pixels.

The Power Of The Atom, it seems, is the power of Megaton, which would amount to very little had Bethesda not followed it to its bitter end. The promise of fire and brimstone hangs over the place until its soil finally does turn to lava, its sky to black, and the horrors of the game's backstory are wrought in realtime on characters you could almost call friends. That final ignominy falls upon Moira Brown, its kooky shopkeeper, who wanders the 'apocalypse' version of Megaton as an inhuman ghoul.

This impinges upon an assumed inalienable right of modern adventures: that you should always, at least until the endgame, be able to revisit and rediscover. The open world should stay open until its quests have been looted. They cost enough to build, after all. Megaton doesn't just blow that right to smithereens, it walks you through the schematics, has you hook up the wires, then hands you the plunger with a nice glass of port. You scoffingly call the game's bluff – and then much of your game is gone.

Then, having consigned a substantial chunk of itself to oblivion, the game does something equally selfless – it gives you something you're supposed to think is rubbish. It asks: was it worth it, your new penthouse in Allistair Tenpenny's glittering castle, with its uninterrupted view of the bigoted old codger shooting whatever creatures he didn't pay you to blow up? And how's your friendship with the reptilian Mr Burke and those other incestuous shut-ins? Or the germ-free water and ghoul-free corridors? Bland, you confess; life without Megaton makes the Wasteland feel small. It makes *Fallout 3* feel worse.

What tends to happen at this point is that the player pays old Tenpenny a visit, listens to what few dialogue options he has left, then throws him off his balcony. Then they go on a rampage that turns Tenpenny Tower into a tomb before reloading an old save, effectively killing themselves.

Fans of the *Witcher* games, in particular, will say this constitutes a 'bad' moral choice – and they might even be right. The immediacy of consequence in Bethesda RPGs lends itself to the quicksave/quickload habit of rewriting your immediate past, creating a game of no real consequence at all, only choice. Nowhere is this truer than in the demise of Megaton, which it's hard to imagine many players making a permanent feature of their campaigns. Inserting a few hours of play between choice and consequence would 'fix' this 'problem', but would players actually want it? Or do they, in fact, prefer the aesthetic jollies of a 'what if' scenario, a nightmare that ends with a quick reboot? ■

Things

THE BLOCK

One of gaming's oldest tools is also one of its most important



1: *Chuckie Egg*
2: *Blocks That Matter*
3: *Super Mario Bros*
4: *Tetris*
5: *Minecraft*
6: *Bomberman*
7: *3D Dot Game Heroes*
8: *Klax*
9: *Kid Icarus*
10: *Bubble Bobble*
11: *Denki Blocks*
12: *Ghosts 'N Goblins*
13: *Lumines: Puzzle Fusion*
14: *Metroid*
15: *Mega Man*
16: *Boulder Dash*
17: *Minesweeper*
18: *Columns*
19: *Baku Baku Animal*
20: *Zoo Keeper*
21: *Mighty Flip Champs*
22: *Manic Miner*
23: *Donkey Kong*

Videogames were originally built from blocks, and some of them never got over it. Can you blame them? From the pixel to the tile to the cube – it counts, even when it's built from polygons rather than the more honest, but exotic, voxels – and from the ammo crate to the tetronimo, blocks are as good a basic unit of currency as the medium is likely to get. Blocks unite everything from the floating platforms of the Mushroom Kingdom to the box-riddled alleyways of *Deus Ex*'s Detroit, and yet they can do so much more than that too. They allow an instinctive and powerful connection between real-world ideas and game-world implementation.

In other words, you know what you can do with blocks inside games because you've probably been playing with them outside of games since you were under a year old. Stack them, stand on them, knock them over: it's a universal concept. Game blocks are often quietly magical – they can be made to hover, explode, or even flicker in and out of existence – but they're always practical magic, and that's the very best conceivable fit for worlds constructed to explore the possibilities that exist within strict rulesets.

Once, games worked with blocks because designers only had a limited choice. Blocks or lines? Raster or vector graphics? While the latter would always belong to the future – it was sharp vectors that went on to define the hard light ribbons of Tron and dozens of other science-fiction films – blocks and pixels now seem synonymous with the past. Retro games are classified as retro, for the most part, because you can literally see the blocks they were built from. You can see their developers' careful brickwork, and you can imagine dismantling it.

Retro games are classified as retro because you can literally see the blocks they were built from

In *Super Mario Bros* you *could* dismantle it, destructible levels being a fascinating concept that Nintendo mastered early on, only for it to be ignored at first in favour of inertial platforming physics and side-scrolling. Eventually, though, action games would return to environmental damage – and at a much greater processing cost.

Do games like *Red Faction: Guerrilla* and *Battlefield: Bad Company* actually handle destruction any better than *Mario* did? Not really, and it's because of blocks. The basic atomic unit of *Red Faction*'s landscape remains mysterious to players: you have to just swing your hammer and see what happens. In Mario's world, blocks allow you to pull things apart strategically. You can chip shapes out of the brick. You can plan ahead. You can become a sculptor instead of a blunt wrecker.



***Blocks That Matter*, Swing Swing Submarine's indie game available on Xbox Live and Steam, casts the player as a robot called Tetrobot, tasked with solving puzzles by using its ability to drill blocks out and recycle them into new blocks and platforms**

Blocks eventually faded from the scene in platformers, even though the likes of Sonic and Nathan Spencer still raced through worlds that were constructed from tiles and pixels. Blocks weren't left in anyone's wake, though: they found a new home – and a new way to truly express their potential – in puzzle games.

It's easy to look at screenshots of *Tetris*, or *Columns*, or *Lumines*, or a dozen other puzzlers, and decide that many of them are essentially alike. Blocks will fall into a mysterious well, and it's your job to remove them. And yet the differences between these games – the ways they reveal their distinct characters – are found in the way they handle those blocks. Forget the far reaches of experimental action titles, it's the simple falling-shape puzzler that sees the medium at its most tactile and dynamic. The block makes puzzle games abstract and stylish, but it also makes them architectural – and even archaeological.

So, in *Tetris* you're the frantic factory worker, building walls that disappear when they're complete until all you're left with are your Swiss-cheese mistakes. Many have argued that the whole thing represents an indictment of the Soviet system, but the game's nagging Icarus tug towards perfection seems too roundly human to be tied to any specific dogma. *Lumines* may involve shuffling shards of colour together, but the landscape is seismic: the ground collapses over you as you clear blocks, and in its chaining system you can thread dynamite through the entire play area.

Every puzzle game brings its own twist, and the genre has been branching out over the past decade or so: in recent years it's infiltrated everything from stealth games like *Splinter Cell: Conviction* to lo-fi platformers such as *Mighty Flip Champs*. It's no surprise to see that blocks are on the march, too. *Minecraft* has led the charge: Mojang's weaponised Lego set allows players to build almost anything they want from blocks as they gather resources, alter the landscape and fight off zombies. Once again, blocks lay at the centre of a brilliant intertwining of destruction and creation, and if you play the classic alpha build, there's no right, no wrong, no winning or losing. It's just building and breaking. It's just blocks.

You could feel nostalgic about blocks, then, if only they had ever gone away. Instead, it's left to the likes of *Blocks That Matter* to pay homage to one of videogaming's most enduring ideas while simultaneously making good use of them. With every locked chest you find in Swing Swing Submarine's tricksy little platformer you unlock a hand-drawn image of one of the block games that inspired it. If you're a completist, your level-select screen will eventually become a hall of fame for the medium's most unassuming star. As you play, you'll be laying down brightly coloured paving stones that lead from the distant past and on towards the future. ■



STUDIO PROFILE

Guerrilla Games

The Dutch powerhouse behind the Killzone series pushes forward without leaving its small-studio virtues behind

1 Guerrilla's artists apply a bold, cohesive style across the entire Helghast lineup. 2 ISA sergeant Tomas 'Sev' Sevchenko stars in *KZ2* and *3*. 3 Helghast hardware can be chunky, and the heavy trooper packs some of the chunkiest



Founded 2000
Employees 160
Key staff Hermen Hulst (managing director), Arjan Brussee (development director), Mathijs de Jonge (game director, new IP), Steven Ter Heide (game director, *Killzone* series), Michiel Van Der Leeuw (technical director)
URL www.guerrilla-games.com
Selected softography *Rhino Rumble, Shellshock: Nam '67, Killzone, Killzone: Liberation, Killzone 2, Killzone 3*
Current projects *Killzone* follow-up, plus unannounced new IP

Toward the rear of Guerrilla's sleek new offices – past the display case with the bizarre thumb-shaped trophy for *Killzone 3*'s Game of the Year win at the Mexican MTV Game Awards, past the Banksy-style graffiti depicting a squad of Helghast staging a raid on the lavatories, past the imposing cluster of audio design pods occupying the centre of the office – our tour pauses at yet another group of desks. This one doesn't appear noticeably different from any of the other departments we've passed, but something special is afoot in this area.

While the bulk of Guerrilla's staff soldiers on with the next *Killzone* instalment, an embryonic new IP is growing within the studio for the first time in seven years. Former *Killzone* game director Mathijs de Jonge sits at one of these desks, now heading up the team of close to 20 working on the new game. Additional staff cycle in from the *Killzone* team for brief stints to lend their expertise.

Guerrilla has grown swiftly over the past several years due to the success of *Killzone*, the Amsterdam studio's marquee FPS franchise and a coveted exclusive for Sony, which acquired the studio in 2005. With 160 staff currently on the payroll, you might expect the team focused on Guerrilla's new IP to spark a bit of nostalgia in the studio's MD, **Hermen Hulst**. After all, when he joined there were just 11 people on the staff.

"'Nostalgia' is not the right word," Hulst corrects. "I'm very aware that being small and being authentic have great value. So we made a really huge effort – and I think we've succeeded – in maintaining what was good from the old days and not giving that up." Confessing to nostalgic feelings would be an admission that Guerrilla's small-studio era had passed, and Hulst firmly believes that, with enough dedication, a studio of nearly 200 can function with the cohesion and agility of a diminutive startup.

> "The day we have staff and I don't know their first and last names, we've grown too big as a studio"

"The day we have staff and I don't know their first and last names, we've grown too big as a studio," Hulst says. "That's important. To make the kind of games that we make, you need a lot of specialists. And if you're so big that you're going to be a factory of 700 people, nobody knows who's in charge of the studio. I don't think that's the best motivator for creativity. It's important to stay small, at least in mindset."

Guerrilla's small-company mindset lends the studio a sort of underdog scrappiness. It's right there in the company's name – the notion of a small independent fighting force taking on the formal military establishment. **Steven Ter Heide** – a senior producer on *Killzone 2* and *3*, and game director on the current *Killzone* project – pins these values in part to the studio's Dutch heritage. "Even though Amsterdam's a big city now, Holland itself is a very small country," he says. "So it's a cultural thing where you always want to say, 'OK, we're not going to be outdone by other people because we can stand our ground as well.'"

You can't examine the rise of Guerrilla without simultaneously getting an education in the historical arc of game development in the Netherlands. The company's roots go back to Holland's vibrant PC demoscene of the late '80s and early '90s, essentially the computer programming equivalent of rock's '70s punk underground. Upstart coders who initially cut their teeth by cracking and modding commercial software began to set their ambitions higher than painting atop canvases created by other programmers. Many years before he founded Guerrilla and became the studio's development director, a virtuosic Dutch programmer named Arjan Brussee built a groundbreaking 3D PC demo. Released in 1991, Vectordemo attracted the attention of Tim Sweeney's Epic MegaGames and eventually led to a working partnership with the company.

Brussee went on to set up Orange Games in 1993 and served as lead programmer on Epic's *Jazz Jackrabbit* series, working alongside another promising up-and-comer named Cliff Bleszinski. He even moved to the US for a period of time during production of *Jazz Jackrabbit 2* along with colleague **Michiel Van Der Leeuw** (presently Guerrilla's technical director), who handled all the engine development on *Jazz Jackrabbit 2*. Upon returning to the Netherlands after the close of the project, Orange Games took on a few more coders and began working on a cyberpunk RPG called *Call Of The Dragonfly* that would never see the light of day ("the documentation was like 600 pages of mindfuck from our designer," Van Der Leeuw says with a laugh).





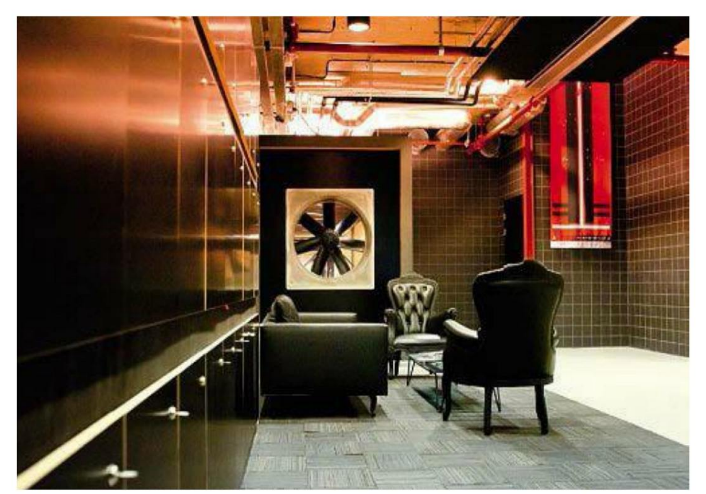
Technical director Michiel Van Der Leeuw (left) has been at Guerrilla since its inception; MD Hermen Hulst (centre) since 2000. Ex-producer Steven Ter Heide is now *Killzone* director

The studio built an in-house 3D engine – which supported dynamic shadows and realtime lighting – but there wasn't much actual game to show publishers, just the ability to move a collection of characters around and a primitive idea of the user interface. The project seemed to have a curse hanging over it. During a visit to Activision's London office for a pitch meeting, the computer that was supposed to run the demo refused to function. Then the team missed their flight home and proceeded to travel between five different airports, missing flights at each one before finally getting back to Amsterdam.

In 2000, Orange Games merged with two other small Dutch developers, Digital Infinity and Formula, to create a new company called Lost Boys Games. They brought in Hulst – who'd done some marketing work on Ubisoft's *Rayman* series while finishing up his engineering degree, then worked in Silicon Valley as a marketer for Dutch tech company Philips – to manage the operation. "I had limited management and entrepreneurial experience," Hulst explains. "But how does the expression go? In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king."

The team at Lost Boys Games found itself stretched thin, producing small-scale licensed titles across three different platforms (PlayStation, Game Boy Color and Game Boy Advance). But the studio still had ambitions to work on a more substantial project, along with a powerful technology base – the Core Engine – designed to be relatively flexible and agnostic to genre. All that was left to do was settle on a winning idea.

Based on his conviction that the console was the future of videogames, staff member Martin de Ronde (formerly head of Digital Infinity) suggested that the studio should make a console FPS. The genre had up to that point been a fixture of the PC ➲





Left: The studio's lobby entrance echoes the bold colour scheme and industrial flair of its award-winning franchise, though we're sure the fan is purely decorative. Above: the *Killzone* universe is regarded as one of the most richly imagined worlds in the crowded FPS genre

gaming landscape, but the success of *GoldenEye* – a rare example of a convincing console FPS at the time – appeared to confirm his hunch. Since Sony was the most successful console developer at this point, it seemed like the obvious platform to target. "We were a really young, very inexperienced, relatively stupid company," Van Der Leeuw recalls, "and we had a bunch of guys going, 'Yeah, we're going to make a shooter and it'll be great', and – boink – the idea stuck."

In 1999, prior to its merger with Digital Infinity and Formula, Orange Games had pitched Sony a tech demo entitled 'Marines'. Sony greenlit the project, which evolved into *Killzone*. The *Killzone* IP would become increasingly vital to Sony, as the company felt pressure to answer the success of *Halo* on Microsoft's newly launched Xbox.

Lost Boys Games soon added another game to its workload, bringing in extra programmers to shoulder the development burden, increasing the studio's size to nearly 50 staff. One of the producers at Sony who'd grown fond of working with Lost Boys Games left to work for Eidos. He approached the studio about doing a project together and signed it up to produce *Shellshock: Nam '67* ("I wouldn't say I don't like to talk about [*Shellshock*]," Van Der Leeuw says, "but it's not our best game").

'Shellshock' could easily refer to the atmosphere in the studio when, seven months before the game was scheduled to ship, Eidos announced that it would be lopping three whole months off the development timeline in order to get the game on shelves before the end of the fiscal year. "We had to rush it," Hulst recalls. "We had no time for polish and basically forced the game out the door." Despite the schedule, *Shellshock* would go on to sell nearly a million copies.

Even before *Shellshock* and *Killzone* shipped, major changes were under way in the studio's ownership. Dutch multimedia conglomerate Lost Boys was in the process of going public in 2003, and stockholders who expected projects to ship roughly every six months didn't know what to make of game development cycles that stretched out over several years. The company ultimately cut its game division loose.

Original Lost Boys founder Michiel Mol still wanted to keep a toe in videogames ("he's mad about games," Van der Leeuw says) so he effectively sold the game division to himself, absorbing it into his new venture, Media Republic. The studio rebranded itself Guerrilla Games, a name whose military overtones echoed the new breed of IP under development. The management at Guerrilla understood that Media Republic was not a tenable long-term solution, however, given that a large stakeholder with general media interests could prove more of a risk than an asset. "Somebody could walk into your studio and ask you to make a Big Brother game," Hulst says. "We're making *Killzone* here – that's very different!"

> The prerendered Killzone 2 trailer was only meant to be circulated internally as a vision document

Mol ultimately agreed to let Guerrilla pursue a different buyer, which paved the way for the studio's acquisition by Sony. Firstparty publishers have a vested interest in showing off what their platform is capable of, and Guerrilla's technological ambitions made it an ideal partner. After a hectic year in which Hulst spent his days in the studio and his nights working with lawyers, the acquisition went through in December of 2005. (During our visit to Guerrilla, several visiting accountants from Sony are camped out in a meeting room examining accounts. "That's not because they want to control it," Hulst says. "It's because I asked them to. Now we spend almost all our time making games.")

Sony's confidence in Guerrilla's technical wizardry led to a minor controversy at E3 2005. While developing a sequel to *Killzone*, once again for PS2, Guerrilla worked with Scottish visualisation outfit Axis Animation to create a prerendered trailer that would set out a vision for what the IP might look like on Sony's upcoming PlayStation 3 hardware. The video was only meant to be circulated internally as a vision document, but Phil Harrison, then head of Sony Computer Entertainment's Worldwide Studios, decided that it ought to be shown onstage at the company's press conference. Harrison's comments introducing the video ("This is what some of our partner studios are working on…") were just vague enough to allow viewers to believe that the trailer featured actual gameplay footage. Even if it wasn't real yet, surely Guerrilla would figure out a way to deliver on its promise.

"There was a very big desire in a lot of people at Sony for the footage to be [real gameplay]," Van der Leeuw says. "We were sitting in the office working on *Killzone 2* for the PlayStation 2. I remember Remco [Straatman], who was the *Killzone 2* lead programmer, chatting with me over MSN during the press conference, and he was like, 'Uh oh, when is somebody going to say that this is not real? I don't think it's going to happen. How long do you think it will be before we're all working on a PlayStation 3 game?' I was like, 'Maybe three weeks?' and he said, 'Nah, two and a half.' And I think he won – two and a half weeks later we were working on the PlayStation 3."

The most expensive entertainment property ever produced in the Netherlands, *Killzone 2* shipped in 2009 to critical acclaim, silencing the chorus of detractors who'd accused Guerrilla of peddling vapourware. The studio had achieved visual benchmarks on the PS3 hardware that many thought impossible. The game's follow-up, *Killzone 3*, was ambitious in its own way, creating a more feature-rich experience in a narrower timeframe, while also serving as a worthy showcase for Sony's Move and 3DTV initiatives.

With its new, custom-built workspace, a return to multiple projects and the ability to make the most of a veteran staff comprised of at least 25 nationalities, Guerrilla might just be the most overpowered underdog in game development today. ■



Q&A

Adrian Smith
Studio recruiter,
Guerrilla Games

In order to meet its growth plans, Guerrilla brought in Brit **Adrian Smith** to locate and attract the videogame industry's finest talent. We explore the tricks of his trade.

What balance does Guerrilla strike between advertising and head-hunting specific developers?
Head-hunting is my preferred way of recruiting. It's a more guaranteed result at the end of the day than advertising. You're more likely to get the people you want. You're already looking at their skills, their experience, and you're looking at the whole package of that person that you can deliver back into the studio. Advertising is like fishing – you cast a wide net and you're looking at what you can reel in. Any fisherman will tell you that they don't always get the cod that they need – you'll get other stuff, too, and that's just how recruiters look at it. That being said, advertising's a good tool and it also keeps the studio's profile high.

On the flipside, you've got other studios head-hunting your staff, presumably.
Always. One studio, whose name I won't mention, tried to head-hunt quite a few of our guys out of here about six months ago. And our directors weren't happy. That studio's recruiter contacted me and said, "Well, it's all fair in love and war, basically. We have a balance: you take some of ours, and we take some of yours. That's how it works." And I have to agree with it, to be honest. It was just a bit blatant, the way they did it.

Which departments have the most turnover?
We've come to the end of a big project recently. Like any studio, when you get to the end of a big project, you've got a certain amount of staff that have worked the franchise for a number of years. It's not that they get fed up with it, as such; they need a change for their head, for their own life. I wouldn't say career progression, but they just want to work on something different. They want to work on an RPG; they want to work on a sports game.

Is it important they've worked on an FPS?
That depends. Obviously it's ideal that we can get somebody from a triple-A studio that works on shooters. If you have an artist who's worked at a racing studio for five or six years on environment art – with all due respect to them, unless they've done a personal project that's in line with what we do, a racing game is entirely different from a shooter. In a shooter you can walk up to a wall, you can study the textures, the environment, in micro detail. That artist will be used to working with environments that you go past at 1,000 miles an hour.

What are your growth targets?
We've got to continue the *Killzone* franchise and we've got another IP on the go so we've got to look to the next year and two. We're at 160 heads now; we're looking to get to about 190 to 200 within 12 months. That may or may not happen because of our benchmark.





Guerrilla's brand-new studio overlooks Amsterdam's Herengracht canal. It has a spacious boardroom (top), plus a mo-cap studio downstairs (centre)

with 180 million Arabs under the age of 25*...



...the gaming industry is set to boom in the Arab world.



THE MAKING OF…

Full Spectrum Warrior

From military training sim to award-winning game and virtual immersion therapy, Pandemic's game rose through the ranks

FSW's promotional material focused on the depiction of the army as professional soldiers

Publisher THQ
Developer Pandemic
Format PC, Xbox
Origin US
Release 2004

On the back of *Full Spectrum Warrior's* packaging is the legend "Based on a training aid developed for the U.S. Army*". Follow the asterisk to the small print below and you'll find a pretty hefty disclaimer: "This game is not sponsored or endorsed by the United States Army". Somewhere in the gap between those two statements lies a little-known story, an amazing example of videogames' usefulness as real-world applications.

FSW began life as a military tool. Today, long after the game franchise has run out of steam, its core engine is still being used by army research psychologists treating soldiers suffering from post traumatic stress disorder.

No one's more surprised at its impact than project director **William H Stahl**. Back in 1999, Stahl was working as a lead designer at US developer Pandemic when the opportunity to collaborate with the US Army came up.

"Every recruit who joins the military these days has grown up playing videogames," he explains. "The Army's point was, 'Hey, all these kids are coming in with Xbox or PS controllers in their hands. Can we control our tanks this way? Can we use two thumb sticks, four buttons? Can we give feedback through rumble instead of audio cues or something?' They were all about leveraging what their recruits already knew to make them better combatants or officers."

"Kids are coming in with Xbox or PS controllers in their hands. Can we control our tanks this way?"

The project was called C4, and it was a collaboration between Pandemic, Sony Imageworks and the Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT), an army research lab based at the University of Southern California, just up the road from Pandemic's LA offices.

The US Army liaison officers involved in the project were adamant that the simulation wouldn't be firstperson. *Doom* may have been modded for US marines, but many felt that FPS games were useless at best, dangerous at worst. Rather than promoting decision making, strategic thinking and teamwork, they simply encouraged cowboy heroics. "The feedback we got from the Army was that running and shooting in games has no real-world equivalent," Stahl says. "It doesn't train you to do anything." Instead, it was looking for a realtime strategy game that ditched the traditional god view for a boots-on-the-ground perspective.

Working with ICT's creative director James Korris, Stahl's group built a "cognitive leadership training aid". Players controlled two fireteams



***FSW*'s lead designer Richard Wyckoff cut his teeth on *Jurassic Park: Trespasser*, and is today CEO of indie dev Reverge Labs**

moving through an urban environment using bounding overwatch (where one team offers covering fire while the other moves). The aim was to reinforce what junior officers were learning about small-unit leadership. Could a console game simulate the pressure of issuing orders under fire? Nobody knew for certain, but Stahl was among those eager to find out.

Following September 11, 2001, as America marched to war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Pentagon's funding increased. The injection of capital filtered into every sector of military spending including ICT's R&D projects, and a new generation of US service personnel were being shipped overseas to fight counter-insurgency wars in urban environments. These weren't the jungle battles of Vietnam but the modern 'three block' war that American troops had first experienced in Haiti and Somalia. In these urban combat zones soldiers might be asked to fight, keep the peace and offer aid within the space of three city blocks. It was a diverse field of operations that put unique stress on low-ranking officers who would need to make quick decisions in rapidly evolving situations.

Suddenly, C4 seemed like an incredibly useful tool. Since every barracks had consoles, the decision was taken to fast-track the project. Meanwhile, its environments were updated from eastern Europe to the Middle East. Plans to run the game on PS2 were shelved; the console was Japanese, and any equipment made outside the US was considered a potential enemy threat.

Since no one wanted soldiers fiddling with PC graphics cards and drivers to get the game to work, Stahl and his team switched their focus to the original Xbox. "The thinking was: the Xbox is portable, relatively durable – built to withstand five-year-olds beating it with a hammer," Stahl explains. "So we thought we'd leverage the fact that every barracks has an Xbox and make content for it that soldiers could play during their downtime instead of *Ghost Recon*, which was popular but was reinforcing the wrong principles." It was videogame version of homework: squad leaders could play through tactics that mirrored the lessons they were learning in class.

Nobody thought C4 would ever become a retail game, least of all Stahl. "It's a military shooter but you're not shooting," he laughs. "I would have got blank stares if I'd walked into EA and tried to pitch that!" But as publishers visited Pandemic Studios and caught a glimpse of the project, unlikely buzz began to generate. "They'd come into the office and see C4 and say, 'Damn, this is fantastic! We want to play more'."

What was particularly impressive was the quality of animation. Sony Imageworks had created a huge database of soldier animations by videotaping a real-life sergeant going through his moves and rotoscoping the footage. But the real boon was the game's indirect control mechanism. Because players were issuing orders to their men, rather than directly moving an avatar around the screen, the programmers didn't have to interrupt the animation routines as much as they might have done in something like a FPS.

Lead designer **Richard Wyckoff**, who joined Pandemic in October 2002 after having worked at DreamWorks Interactive on *Jurassic Park: Trespasser*, remembers being amazed when he first saw the army build in action: "I don't think you can possibly underrate how important it was to the perception of that game. Smoother, detailed character animations are common now, but in that generation we were up against characters that didn't do a lot and snapped all over the place, so we just visually stood out." Pandemic realised that it had a potential hit on its hands.

On the deserted streets of war-torn Zekistan, the only sound is the heavy thud of boots as soldiers hustle down the block. In the middle of the street lies a burnt-out car, pockmarked with bullet holes. The alleys that run off from the main road are hidden from the sun's glare, dark and foreboding. This isn't a good place to die.

The soldiers run to a corner and stack themselves against the welcome safety of a solid wall. The sergeant pops his head around the dusty masonry. "Got a Zeke in view!" he bellows in a Brooklyn accent. In most games, what happens next could mean a Tango down or a US soldier

going home in a body bag. But in real combat, as in *FSW*, there's often a third way: what would happen if you didn't engage?

For Stahl, one of the greatest surprises of developing C4 was watching real-life squad leaders playing it. "From a gaming standpoint, if I want the player to go in a direction, I put a bad guy over there. Their natural instinct is to move towards the enemy. But the squad leaders who played the early builds would encounter a bad guy and try to get around them. It was really weird. He'd look for alternative ways. For me, *FSW* wasn't ever a game about killing people. The whole purpose was about bringing somebody home who might otherwise die."

"We quickly realised that the core of our gameplay was flanking," Wyckoff says. "It was reflective of the real strategy: you want to pin down the enemy and then get someone around to deny them their cover." Zekistan's maps were built with this in mind. Sometimes it would be possible to avoid enemy contact between you and your objective by taking a detour; other times the covert approach wasn't an option and you'd have to use your teams in a co-ordinated attack.

The danger of combat is something that the game's on-the-ground perspective emphasises. The documentary feel extends from its cutscenes (where there are no edits, only camera pans and tilts to enhance the sense that you're watching with your own eyes) into combat. The Army build of the game had a lieutenant running between the two squads, but his presence proved unwieldy and reduced the framerate.

Underpinning it all is the game's realtime camera system, a beautifully fluid thirdperson perspective that does flybys between the two fireteams and lets you scan a street for hostiles while in cover. Using a unique autolook feature, the camera system helps players look around corners without getting snagged on the walls of the buildings the soldiers are hiding behind. "Find a corner and try to break the camera system – I bet you can't," Stahl challenges proudly. "One of our programmers, John Giors, spent two years on that. If you say to a game publisher, 'I want to have a nuanced camera system,' eyes start to roll. 'What's that going to cost?' But we got to do the R&D because the military required it." It gave *FSW* – both as a training aid and a game – an incredible realism.

Not getting shot is the game's key element. Moving from cover down dusty streets, your team leader's head popping around a corner to check for targets creates a surprising amount of tension.



William H Stahl
Project director, Pandemic

***FSW* was quite controversial on its release, right?**
What I heard a lot when we were doing early press was: 'How do you feel conditioning kids to become killers?' It couldn't have been further from the truth. The purpose was always to stop US soldiers from getting killed, to help them achieve their objectives with fewer casualties. I don't think you come away from *FSW* wanting to go to war. It doesn't paint a rosy picture.

What about the complaints about using American taxpayers' money to build a retail game?
The quote-unquote taxpayers didn't put any money up for the retail game. THQ footed the bill for that. In terms of what the retail game was based – the kernel of the technology – if you look at what that cost relative to what we spend on a toilet seat in Iraq or what Halliburton charges for God knows what, it's an insignificant amount. Relative to the entire military budget, they sneeze as much as they spent on *FSW*. The probably spend that much every five minutes at the Pentagon. Probably every five seconds!

Do you think the franchise still has a future?
I do, yes. The franchise is at EA right now [after it bought Pandemic Studios] and they own the rights to it. I don't know what they're planning on doing with it, but I do know we had a whole vision of how to take it to the next level that never materialised.

You feel responsible for these soldiers, and they're never expendable. "We did everything to make sure the player saw the characters as humans, not polygons," Stahl explains. "The military's biggest fear was that the player would see computer-controlled characters as disposable and just throw them at the bad guys. That's the antithesis of how a squad leader sees his men."

For the retail version his team took this idea even further, giving the soldiers fully fledged personalities and backstories, but originally the aim had been to create an even more powerful emotional link to the soldiers. In early discussions the C4 team talked about a game where players would be able to gauge the stress levels of their men by looking at their faces. It was, Stahl says, "pie in the sky" thinking given the technology they had at the time, but it was exactly what the military was paying them for.

After seeing the facial animation in *LA Noire* and the emotional heft of *Heavy Rain*, the project director believes the idea still has mileage and hopes current franchise holder EA might even consider resurrecting *FSW* with that in mind. "Imagine *Heavy Rain* meets Black Hawk Down. It would be like: 'Here's five guys, get them home'. Just as in *Heavy Rain* you're getting to know these people as you play and you'd suddenly realise, 'Fuck, I don't want these guys to die. He's got a family and all these dreams he wants to achieve, and because of a helicopter crash he's ended up in hell and I've got to get him home.'"

The US military can invade countries, rescue victims of humanitarian disasters and deliver nukes across continents, but getting a game into the hands of its soldiers proved an unexpected challenge. While *FSW* was being put together for the retail market, no one had considered how they'd distribute the Army version.

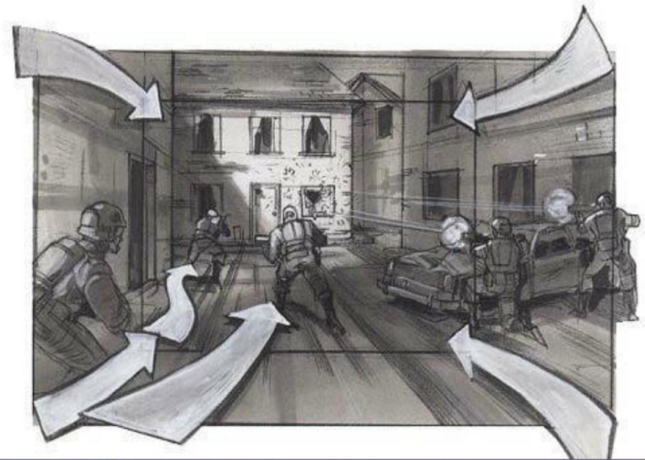
"It was a fault of all of ours," Stahl says. "The Army was under the assumption that whenever they needed a disc, we'd just burn one. No one considered the fact that it had to go through Microsoft for certification."

As a compromise, the military agreed to release a build of the training aid on the *FSW* retail disc (accessible by typing in cheat code ha2p1py9tur5tle). It meant the Army could distribute retail discs to soldiers, but it also meant that the Army version couldn't be updated. With development of the training tool ongoing, it was highly frustrating for the military and ultimately the project would migrate to PCs instead.

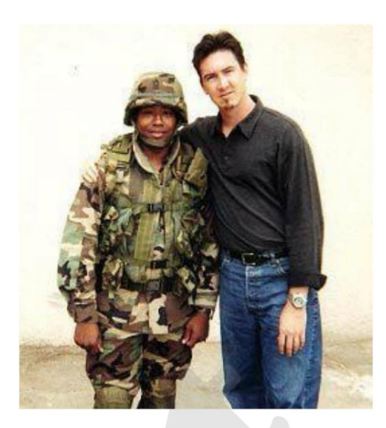
At retail *FSW* was much more successful, selling well over half a million copies and picking up awards at E3 2003. While the game generated a sequel, its real legacy continues at ICT where it has evolved from a training aid for green recruits into a tool for helping veterans recover from post-traumatic stress disorder.

ICT recycled assets from the original game in its Virtual Iraq/Afghanistan project. It allowed therapists to put traumatised soldiers into immersive virtual simulations that can be individually tailored to each patient's particular experiences in combat. "*FSW* jumpstarted the project," explains Dr **Skip Rizzo**, associate director of ICT, "although over the years all that content has been replaced as we got more of a sense of what the user needed."

So far the results of the exposure therapy have been dramatic, and are raising new questions about the real-world usefulness of interactive technology. It's a fitting legacy for a game that was always about bringing soldiers back home in one piece. ■





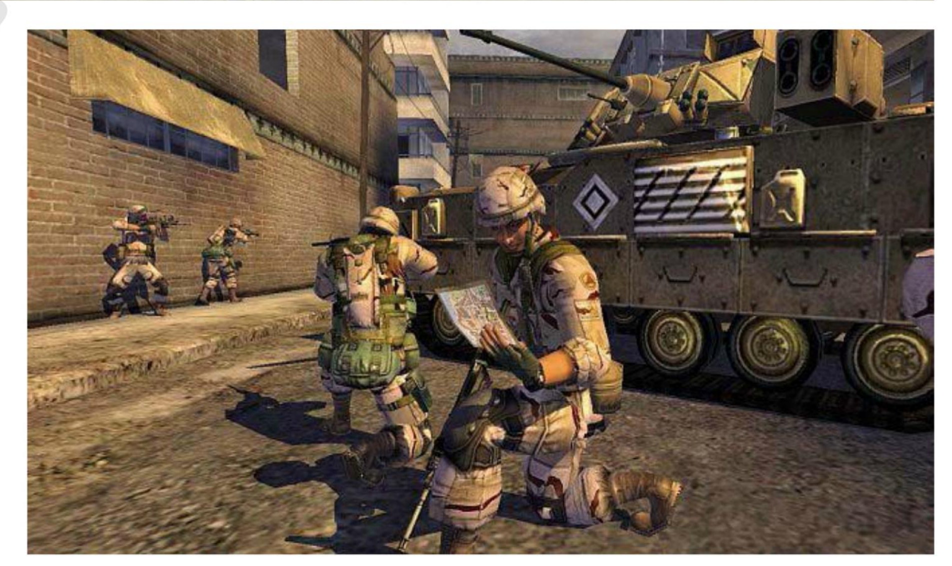


Early concept art and a shot from the C4 build – the locations, pre-September 11, were European. Right: project director William H Stahl and Sgt Jack Batten, who was videotaped in action by Sony Imageworks



Getting hammered

Released in 2006, *Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers* added a greater variety of tactical options, vehicles and indoor sections. But the sequel was something of a disappointment for its project director. "I'm not really happy with *FSW2*," Stahl confesses. "We were motivated more by financials and it ended up as more of a 1.5 than a 2.0, I think." It didn't help that its release was troubled by bad timing. Scheduled for to come out on the original Xbox just as the console's next-gen successor arrived, the game was held back by its publisher. "It was a very bad decision on THQ's part," Wyckoff says. "They thought they'd wait until the dust settled after the Xbox 360 launch, but in the meantime *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* came out, resetting the bar for visuals in military games." That meant few people got to see the sequel's one inspired addition: an asymmetric multiplayer mode which had players controlling squads competing against one another.



Sequel *Ten Hammers* continues the emphasis on small unit tactics. Momentary decisions are all that separate winning and losing

What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

Let British games be British

When someone calls me 'an IT geek' it triggers one of my pet hates: being labelled a technology worker. It says that making games is a craft or a service, not an art.

I understand why many outsiders have this impression. Game studios are often structured like software companies, and employment law (such as for work permits) tends to consider developers as technical rather than creative professionals. Games are reviewed in the technology sections of national newspapers (if at all), and funding assistance tends to come from technology research grants rather than the Arts Council.

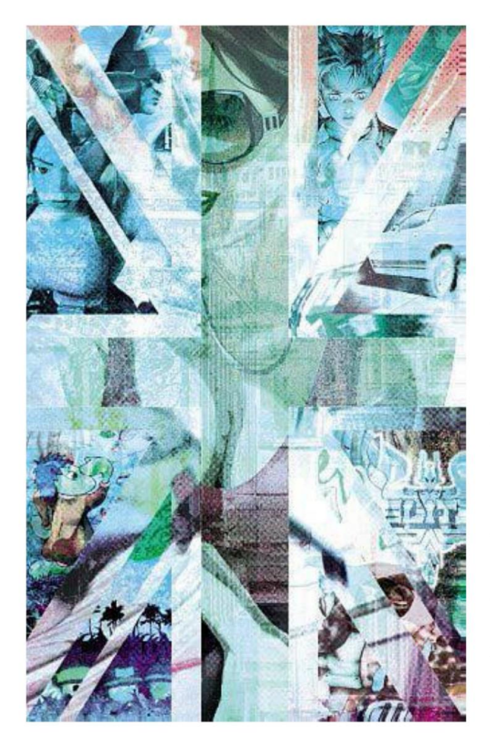
While making games is just as creative as opera or TV, the industry often behaves like a service provider. So much so that (according to NESTA) the British game industry was worth £2 billion in 2008, yet most British people assume that all of the big games are actually made in the US, Japan or China. They have no idea that *GTAIV* was actually made in Scotland.

British-developed games often imitate other (usually American) cultures. *Operation Flashpoint: Red River* is a typical example, complete with stereotypical US marines talking about protecting America. Alternatively, British games often have a generic character, by which I mean any developer from around the world could have created them.

This is not necessarily bad. One of the main concerns for a publisher is ensuring that its games have broad appeal because they need to sell many millions in order to succeed. In casual or social games, the broader the better. However, for hardcore games I think that the lack of a definable identity is often a negative rather than a positive.

Nintendo's key characters all have a certain Japanese charm, yet they work on the international stage. While some Japanese games are strictly domestic affairs, many of the franchises are global. Capcom, Square Enix, Namco, Sega and others happily export their national identity as a part of their marketing, and it works. This despite having significant language barriers to overcome.

Even Japanese games which are set in other parts of the world (such as *Resident Evil* or *Metal Gear Solid*) tend to show a uniquely Japanese understanding of the outside world rather than a



In creating games for other cultures, Britain is essentially painting itself as a second-class game-making nation

carbon copy. Some games are just too weird for the west, but for many their Japanese character adds a unique dimension, which attracts fans.

A similar point could be made for other nationalities. The influences of local culture in each are recognisable, and so they feel created rather than just developed. Studios are not purposefully setting out to make nationalised games, but the difference between them and British developers is that they're not deliberately quashing themselves in order to pretend to be someone else.

It takes a particularly cynical view of the industry to conclude that British culture is actually a problem, especially given how successful it tends to be in other media. British actors often win Oscars. British TV shows are often licensed around the world. British musicians sell billions of tracks, and British comic writers are some of the best in the world. British comedians, artists and filmmakers happily make entertainment which works in any language but which retains a distinctly British character.

British games used to have that quality, particularly in the bedroom days. *Jet Set Willy*, *Elite* and *Hover Bovver* are examples of games that could only have been made in Britain. *Dungeon Keeper*, *Lemmings*, *Theme Park* and many more had a gleeful and ironic sense of humour. *Cannon Fodder* was a wonderfully British game. Even games like *Wipeout* had a definable visual and musical component that was very modern Britain circa 1995.

Britishness in games should not mean cockney accents and Union Jacks any more than Gordon Ramsay's brand of cheffing means selling egg and chips or builders' tea. I think it's a satirical sense of humour showing insight and irreverence. And, yes, there is a huge market for that.

In the fantasy genre, consider how *Skyrim* or *Diablo III* (both US-made) draw inspiration from British fantasy archetypes. Look at the global success of Harry Potter or A Game Of Thrones.

As game makers, this sort of cultural cachet is a massive advantage. But in creating games for other cultures, Britain is essentially painting itself as a second-class game-making nation. Games are a cultural export, not an IT industry, and customers prefer originals over knockoffs.

In response to a decline in global standing, the British game industry wants tax breaks. However, I think the real issue is bigger than just financial concerns. Even with tax breaks, what's stopping other countries from usurping that service business through outsourcing? Nothing. The real value in any creative industry comes from original contributions, because they are hard to copy. This is a lesson that British game makers need to learn.

Do British studios really want to keep making games for other cultures, or do they want to make their own? British game makers can bring so much more to the table than being IT geeks, and I would like to see them realising it.

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him online at whatgamesare.com


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In The Click Of It



CLINT HOCKING

Making every bullet count

As action games have evolved, so too have the sensibilities of designers as pertains to different core elements of gameplay. It wasn't that long ago, for example, that the standard in FPS design was having ten guns that the player could carry, with each of them also having an alt-fire mode. From a gamer perspective, it may have seemed random when *Halo* hit big with the two-gun model, and even the original *Far Cry* bucked the trend by limiting the player to four weapons, but for the most part these decisions appear to have been carefully considered – at least initially.

Halo's two-gun model was so successful, and made so much sense, that it gave birth to a standard that persists in shooters today. What at one time was a carefully considered (and risky) departure from the prevailing standard is now a default design decision, and perhaps now there are designers who simply short-cut to that standard rather than considering the full ramifications of the different possibilities.

The same appears to be true for prevailing standards in the design of ammunition scarcity. In general, a top-tier action game or FPS will not ask the player to manage his ammunition much. Maximum ammo carrying capacity for a given weapon will tend to be high, ammo pick-ups in the world will tend to be generous, and enemies will tend to drop plenty of ammo as well. A game like *Modern Warfare* doesn't really benefit from having the player run out of ammunition – its fast-paced kill-corridors have an intentional pacing to them that breaks when the player runs out of ammo and has to backtrack to salvage enemy weapons and ammunition.

In its day, *Doom* had a similar fast-paced rhythm, though it was a very different game. Ammo was scarce in *Doom*, and the weapons were highly differentiated. This meant that you would frequently be out of ammo for one or two weapons while burning through it in a few others, trying to maintain a balance of burn rate and income across ten weapons at once, while also trying to use the best weapon against each particular enemy. This, combined with a level design that playfully and often surprisingly cycled back on itself, forcing players to return to areas



Halo's two-gun model was so successful, and made so much sense, that it gave birth to a standard that persists today

they had emptied of ammo, lead to the adoption of a much more intentional style of play. *Doom*, in many ways, tried to suck you into its rhythm, and then kill you while you were entranced. Survival in *Doom* was about dancing with the devil while always staying one step ahead. In *Modern Warfare*, it's more about keeping up the pace.

Monolith's *Condemned* is an oddball. For most of the game you are armed with a two-by-four or a pipe. Guns and ammunition are to *Condemned* what Quad Damage was to *Quake*; a rare and powerful pickup that you needed to use wisely and which you were not likely to have handy when you really needed it. The radical ammunition scarcity in *Condemned* was core to the experience and lead to a sense of desperation in the gameplay that differentiated it from many other games. It was also very disempowering and – I suspect – narrowed its market considerably.

BioShock, while truly great in many ways, did not do a very good job of creating an interesting climate of decisions relating to ammo management. *BioShock* is old-school in that it gives you lots of weapons, but rather than structuring the game toward high burn rates, forcing you to be constantly swapping weapons like *Doom* did, it just seems to give you plenty of ammo for most of the weapons, most of the time. Some weapons are harder to find ammo for, but these weapons also tend to have specialised purposes and are only used intermittently, meaning even when you empty them in a given battle, they are often full again the next time you need them.

By contrast, *BioShock*'s spiritual ancestor *System Shock 2* may be the textbook example of how to handle ammo scarcity without breaking the narrative context of the game and still allowing for a wide range of play styles. First, ammo scarcity was easily overcome in a number of ways. A Psi character didn't need ammo at all, and could recycle it for nanites, while a Marine could level up his skills in several different weapons to ensure he always had a use for whatever ammo he did find. An additional failsafe that prevented players from completely running dry was to have wandering monsters respawn so that the truly desperate player could take his trusty wrench and harvest respawning goons for bullets, nanites, health or other loot drops. There are better and worse strategies for optimising ammo income and burn rate in *System Shock 2* – and also more than one way to opt out of having it matter at all.

In the end, the way ammo scarcity, weapon loadout and carrying capacity are designed is a fundamental driver of the core experience of any action game. While standards, player expectations and usability are also critical considerations, knowing what you want your game to feel like, and understanding how decisions about something as seemingly trivial as ammunition will affect the overall experience, is fundamental to game design.

Clint Hocking is a creative director at LucasArts working on an unannounced project. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com


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The Possibility Space



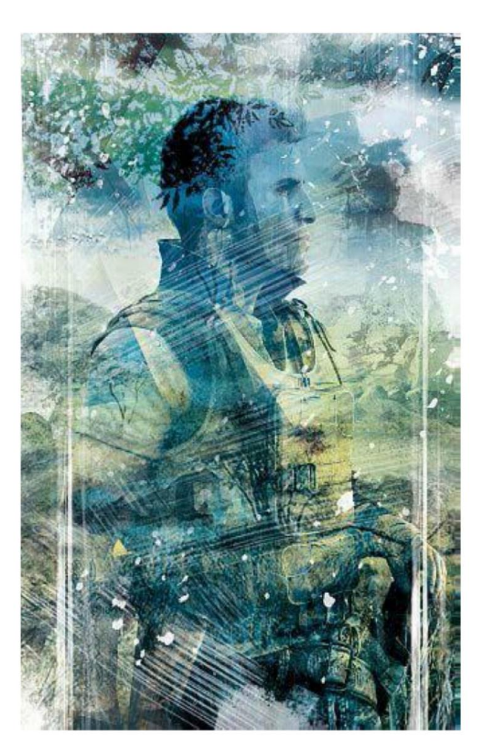
RANDY SMITH

A tale of two realities

Welcome to war-torn Africa. I've been sent here to show you the ropes. Yeah, you just finished the training cinematic sequence, but, look, you should consider that more of a way to establish setting and fiction. It alluded to some gameplay, sure, but it was just as likely to feed you miscues. About what? Well, remember how you drove through that checkpoint and your cab driver talked his way past those guys? That doesn't actually happen. Pretty much the real deal is this: if you see anyone out here, you might as well shoot them, because they are going to shoot you. They are not going to take a bribe or assume you're just another dude with a gun since everyone seems to have one; they are going to assume you are specifically here to kill them and try to kill you first. Without my help, you'd probably find this out the first time you visited a checkpoint. You'd drive right up expecting maybe a tense conversation, but they'd open fire. Maybe you'd kill them, then think you could cruise through the next day, but no, you'd learn another rule: they come back. You could brutally murder everyone at that checkpoint every day for a year, and they'd still find fools to work it.

What are you doing?! Parking your jeep? Why?! Oh, so you can come back for it? Don't worry about that. Just grab another one. These are lethal dudes living in desperate poverty, but there isn't really a concept of vehicle ownership around here. Like when you get off the bus and there's a buggy? Just hop in and drive off! Vehicles are like a community sharing thing for when we aren't shooting each other, which we mostly do all the time, except in town because we all agreed never to shoot in town, except for during that opening cinematic. But from now on: no shooting in town. Good.

Diamonds, that's what's valuable! I wouldn't go so far as to say we *hide* them out in the wilderness, but they wind up there pretty often. I assume we have business meetings and bring briefcases that don't have paperwork but have, like, one diamond apiece in them, but then we misplace them and drive off in whatever vehicle we see nearby. I'm not sure, but you'll find briefcases with diamonds out in the woods,



Rules were invented to simplify, focus, create structure out of arbitrary openness. Don't all games have absurd rules?

is my point. Use them to buy guns on the Internet, which, despite the monochrome scan lines, works way better than your Internet. It instantaneously spirits away your diamonds and teleports new equipment to an adjacent storehouse, which is like an amazing spatial vortex because anything you buy exists in all of them at once. Well, here's the bottom line: permanent objects like jeeps and individual guns aren't necessarily that valuable, because we kind of give them away. Instead, invest in greater selection in your storehouse. And what's worth killing for is consumables, like ammo and syringes. No, you can't buy ammo, it's free. It'll make sense once you get into it. Your malaria medicine? That's not really a resource. I know what we told you, but it's actually a plot point tied to a recurring game mechanic. So don't worry, you can't run out.

Did I mention you can't climb rocks? You can't climb rocks. Consider it in game design terms. We need you down in the valleys where the fighting happens, not evading it up in the mountains! Plus it's hard as hell to animate characters on uneven terrain. Better to make a rule about it. That's why all these rules exist, to craft a better-balanced experience! A less buggy engine!

Hey, I don't mean to imply this is an unrealistic game. Have you seen the plants bending as you walk past? Have you watched the shadows crawl across the plains as the blazing sun arcs overhead? HAVE YOU SEEN THE FIRE PROPAGATION SYSTEM? It's so intuitive! Plenty of stuff is! Don't the vehicles handle like you would expect? Stealth is totally intuitive too! Yes, that means you're never quite sure what you did wrong and why everyone is shooting at you. That's what it would be like in real life! Embrace it. Since you can't tell how it works, you can invent mythologies about whether they see worse with the sun in their eyes, or what they can't hear, or those plants you bend when you're off trail: do they notice that? Make up your own rules. We're never going to lay them out for you.

Look, this isn't the holodeck, so we can't simulate everything exactly perfectly. The rules were invented to simplify, focus, create structure out of arbitrary openness. Don't all games have absurd rules? But since this isn't a generic rail shooter, these rules are new, jarringly unfamiliar. Learning them would normally involve frustrating trial and error, so if anything you're lucky I'm here. Oh, you've got patience for learning curves because you're devoted. You even read columns in videogame magazines. OK, but is there some inherent reason this game shouldn't enjoy the attention of a larger, less hardcore audience? Wouldn't you rather they get into games like this? Innovative, ambitious games always struggle with the problem of explaining themselves, of saying: 'Here's how this game actually works'. So now we have magic elves that live in your mind and explain it to you. It's the best way.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style, whose second game, Waking Mars, *will be released at the end of 2011*

Word Play



JAMES LEACH

The danger of making lists in the pub

The place: a pub in an unseasonably warm London town. The time: the evening after a videogame event. The participants: four writers working in the game industry. The result: two lists. The first one is a whinge about the issues that have dogged game writers for years and continue to do so more often than they should. Let's say hello to those old friends.

Number one. Why are we still brought in late as a sort of wallpapering process? Sure, gameplay is everything, but integrating the writer early enough prevents the sloppiness of having to tell a tale with only three cutscenes, or of having to reconcile a huge cast of NPC characters with a complex plot about a solitary maverick. Or simply trying to build a narrative structure into a series of explosions, each bigger than the last, until finally we meet a giant ninja squid which dances slowly from side to side while you shoot at a brightly lit spot on its head.

Number two. Why are we being asked to copy something else? Yes, people love *GTAIV* or Alien or Lock, Stock And Two Smoking Barrels, but does aping them really make for a better game? And does emulating them well mean you'll emulate their success? Oh, we're doing a pastiche! Why didn't you say?

Number three. Can you all agree on what it is you want? It's a classic RPG. It needs a modern twist. It has to sound like every other RPG so players feel at home, appeal to small children and be very fresh and funky. And while the designer's asking you to herd cats, the producer's asked you to nail jelly to a wall. By end of play today, as we're showing it to the publishers tomorrow.

Number four. Please remember that when there's very limited space, establishing a wide variety of characters is tough. Expecting to see or feel their diametrically opposed differences on paper is also tough, and in the past has directly led to shocking cases of random people sounding like pirates, Mafia bosses, Geordies and other criminals. Not being able to discern wildly varying characters from reading a few lines of dialogue does not mean that the characters 'all sound the same'. Hire different people to act them. You'll see.

Of course, writers moaning is brilliant and endlessly fascinating, but then the conversation turned to the other list. Something, dare I say it, positive. Instead of wishing the problems they encounter didn't occur, what would happen if said writers ruled the game industry and could get anything they want made?



As the designer's asking you to herd cats, the producer's asked you to nail jelly to a wall, all by end of play today

Firstly, borrowing concepts from *Portal*'s GLaDOS, we'd create an in-game entity with astonishing complexity, the ability to learn and a character which changes as a result of events and learning. This wouldn't be a human. Trying to replicate humanity would be too hard and, as everyone knows, if you miss by a fraction it really jars. Our character wouldn't require emotion and player empathy, those traditional holy grails for developers (and, with the empathy, a key element of GLaDOS), but would have to be smart and assured enough to keep the player obsessed with what it knows, what it thinks and what it's going to say next.

Secondly, write a game script so packed with humour that it becomes world famous for that alone. The challenge here isn't so much coming up with funny lines, visual jokes or hilarious characters. That bit's easy. Well, it's not easy, but it's straightforward. No, the thing here is finding out whether a game can be as funny as a movie or TV comedy. On the face of it, no. Humour works because you don't have control over it. You don't know what's going to happen or what's going to be said next. Games are all about giving the player control over events, so can you make a game which is universally funny? It'd be interesting to try. All we need's a few million dollars.

Next, let's make a game which features a character the player can customise to an extraordinary level. The idea is to alter and tweak so much about the character, and to be able to input or upload so much data to it, that it ends up with an unprecedented level of depth and personalisation. Ideally the player would be trying to recreate the most accurate facsimile of him or herself. The test would be when these super Wii Miis would be released unfettered into a game world in which they could operate and communicate without player control. If the player has done a decent enough job, nobody would know when they're controlling the characters and making them speak and when the characters are operating and delivering dialogue autonomously.

Four. It'd be interesting to see what would happen if you wrote a game in which, whatever you did (and you'd be able to do a *lot*), you couldn't escape from a rigid Hero's Journey, the three act structure and any other tried-and-tested filmic conventions which clearly have worked for generations in films. Yes, you could choose your path. You could delay things, you might even be able to fail, but all this wouldn't allow you to deviate from the railroad-like Hollywood-based plot unfolding and character arc.

Let's have a go. How hard can they be?

James Leach is a BAFTA Award-winning freelance writer who works on games and for ad agencies, TV, radio and online

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216

the number of games bought by Amiqus staff this year... so far

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Android 71%

amiqus

We Know Your World

Localisation Testers

French, German, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, Finnish, Norwegian, Portuguese, Polish, Russian

Based in Liverpool, UK

The localisation test team is part of the First Party Quality Assurance department and is responsible for the localisation testing of all SCEE published titles in all localised languages (excluding Asian languages).

Based in Liverpool, testers are primarily responsible for testing of localised text and audio, although proofreading, reviewing and some translating is also involved.

To meet the challenges offered by this role, applicants must be fluent in one of the languages mentioned above and English. It goes without saying that their game playing skills must be good and they should have some experience in using PC applications such as Word and Excel.

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Region Specific: Paris, France

The French capital's developers want the world

While the days of Delphine, Cryo and Infogrames are over, France remains an important player in the videogame industry. And Paris is the epitome of the development scene here, home to some 80 per cent of the country's developers. They're a diverse lot, too. New studio DONTNOD (1) has been secretly working on its Paris-set thirdperson brawler for three years now, and intends to set the standard for the genre when *Adrift* launches next year. Despite that secrecy, though, the company is more than happy to host a group discussion (2) with some of Paris' other key developers, which you'll find in the following pages. They include Kylotonn (3), a developer intent on straddling not only the casual and core divide, but also bespoke tech development as well. And the desire of BulkyPix (4) to help out other mobile developers has seen its own catalogue of iOS games significantly bolstered. Wizarbox, meanwhile, finds the time to produce serious games as well as comedy adventures (5) and bloody hack-and-slash titles. SpawnApps (6) is working on Paris' answer to the cloud, though the company is approaching the problem from a different angle. And Focus Home Interactive (7), despite having only 30 staff, has grown into a global publisher. Supporting them all is Capital Games (8), the non-profit organisation that looks after the Paris industry's interests.


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Paris

A FRENCH TOAST

The city of lights is home to a group of developers who plan to take the 'French touch' to the rest of the world

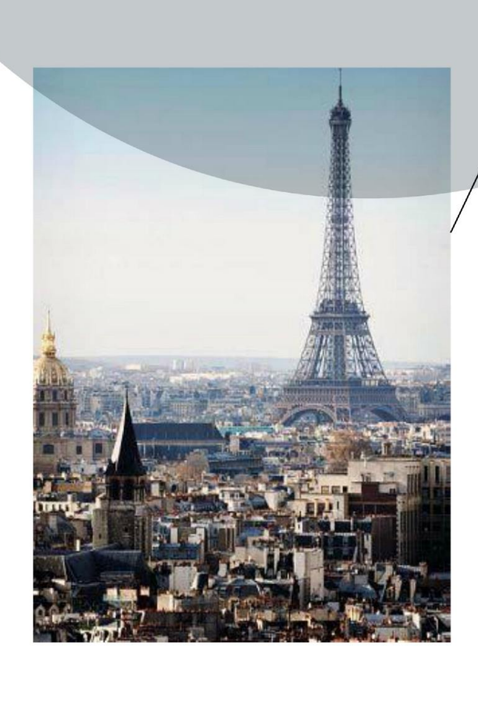


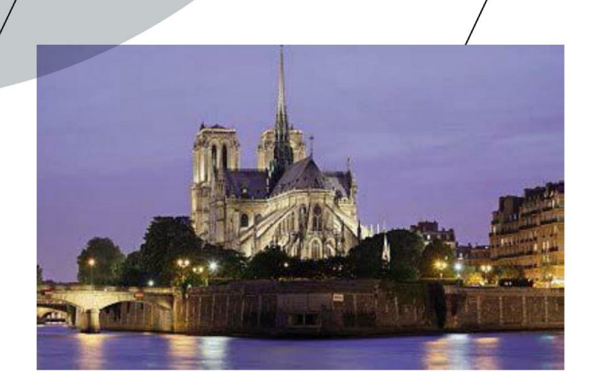
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4

LANDMARKS
1 The Musée du Louvre, located on the right bank of the Seine. **2** Pont Alexandre III bridge, built in 1896, spans the river Seine. **3** The Arc de Triomphe, commemorating France's war dead. **4** Notre Dame de Paris cathedral lit up at night, with hunchback just out of sight. **5** The unmistakable Eiffel Tower, completed in 1889 and holder of the crown for being the tallest building in the world until 1930





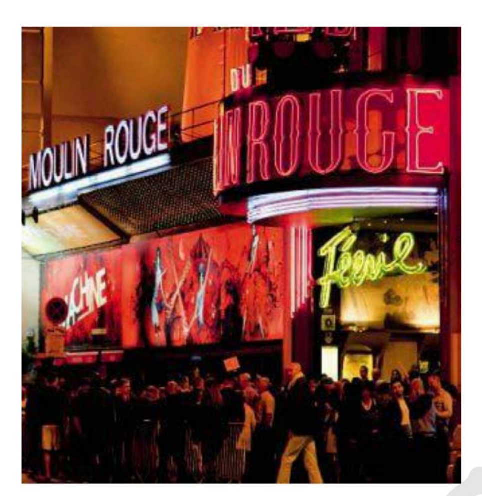
We're fortunate enough to have visited quite a few game and technology development studios, and we've noticed many repeating themes. Desks covered with toys and walls plastered in concept art are one thing, but one less explicable trend is a common move towards the upper floors of whichever building houses them. It means, of course, that we've been privy to some spectacular skyline views over the years, but for all their collective grandeur it's hard not to be wrong-footed by the one we're shown so many times during this particular trip – one that includes the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame de Paris and the Arc de Triomphe.

Paris is iconic, a magical city where cliché and reality are seemingly interchangeable. Good food, good wine and romance can be found as easily as the movies might suggest, but none of these things are exactly synonymous with the late-night crunch and discarded pizza boxes associated with the game industry. Nonetheless, Paris has a long history of videogame development and publishing, playing host to legendary companies such as Delphine and Infogrames, between them responsible for *Another World*, *Flashback* and *Alone In The Dark* – games all still cited today as major influences by developers.

It's that intangible French touch which has made these games, and many more besides, such memorable and critical successes, but the unfortunate reality is that distinctive personality doesn't always translate into sales.

"To be honest with you, the French touch is something that we see more as a curse than anything else," DONTNOD creative director **Jean-Maxime Moris**, whose studio is currently working on promising looking futuristic brawler *Adrift*, itself set in Paris, tells us. "People expect something from you because you're French, and the typical stereotype is that it's going to be great ideas and very poor implementation, basically."

Burdened with this poisoned chalice, many French developers are making a concerted effort to shake off the legacy passed down by the region's early pioneers. The goal now, it would seem, is to focus on addressing the global market that the videogame industry has become and to create games with massmarket, as well as worldwide, appeal. The result is a development scene that is difficult to characterise as its various cogs spin in their own directions, at their own speeds, but somehow still coalesce into a highly effective machine.



The Moulin Rouge, birthplace of the can-can, is no longer frequented by the Prince of Wales, as it was in 1890

There aren't many markets with greater mass than those of mobile and social, and during our visit we find mobile developer BulkyPix achieving such success with its iOS games that it has decided to start publishing other mobile developers' games as well.

Burdened with a poisoned chalice, many French developers are making a concerted effort to shake off the legacy passed down by the region's early pioneers

Dedicated solely to publishing, Focus Home Entertainment has carved an enviable reputation for itself by working with local distributors to target its diverse, and often niche, range of games to the right markets, building up an in-house team of QA testers, localisation experts and artists as it goes.

Kylotonn Games and Wizarbox, meanwhile, are co-conspirators on a bespoke next-gen engine that's enabled them to build core games such as *The Cursed Crusade* and *RAW* for multiple platforms without breaking the bank. And talking of technology, SpawnApps is offering an innovative alternative to the cloud, attempting to shift the 'download and install' nature of programs on the Web to something closer to YouTube by spawning native applications in your browser.

And from what we see of it on monitors during our tour of the aforementioned DONTNOD's studio, the developer is quietly working away on a thirdperson action game that will, at least in terms of production values, stand toe-to-toe with games from the world's best developers.

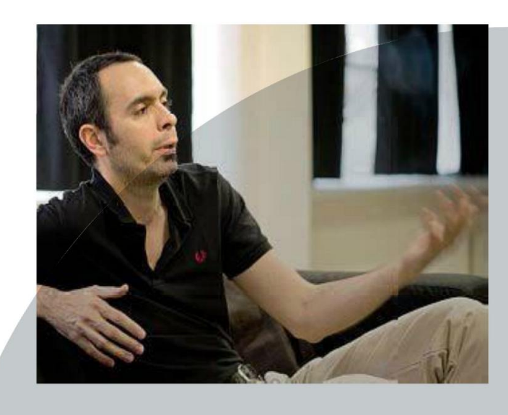
Cohering this disparate collection of Parisian companies, and many more besides – including *RUSE* developer Eugen Systems and *Trackmania* creator Nadeo – is non-profit organisation Capital Games. As well as gathering the city's developers for events such as the upcoming Game Connection Europe – which, along with Capital Games' own Game Paris event, this year making its Paris debut from December 6 to 8, having previously taken place in Lyon – the organisation also aims to help structure the game industry through lobbying, networking and by defining key job and skills profiles.

The AFJV (Agence Francaise pour le Jeux Video – or the French Agency for Video Games), meanwhile, is another non-profit endeavour which aims to promote employment and business creation in the French videogame industry. The agency is headed up by Emmanuel Forsans, who held prominent positions at various studios including Infogrames and Cryo, and has authored several books on IT and 3D modelling. He's also, we discover, a keen photographer, accompanying us for the duration of the trip and snapping the images that appear over the following pages.

While everyone we meet agrees that the efforts of these agencies has been key to the region's success, it is also a commonly held belief that there is more that can done to streamline access to the various types of support available to game companies here. But even with that in mind, France's government takes the industry very seriously indeed.

"We have many different types of grants," DONTNOD CEO **Oskar Guilbert** tells us. "Like tax credits for research and development, tax credits for videogames, some subsidies for pre-production etc. It's important as it lowers the risk for investors. Our investors were partly convinced to work with DONTNOD because of the cost reductions arising from specific grants and subsidies here in France."

With 70 per cent of the region's developers and publishers based in the city, and a newly invigorated determination to demonstrate to the world that games created here are just as relevant to audiences gorged on the hyper-polished output of the US, UK and Japan, it would appear that even in the city of lights, it is the members of Paris' game industry that are shining the brightest. ■





RENDEZ-VOUS IN PARIS



One of the world's most beautiful cities is home to a bountiful development scene







Oskar Guilbert
CEO, DONTNOD



Cyril Labordrie
COO, Wizarbox



Alex Macris
CEO, SpawnApps



Roman Vincent
CEO, Kylotonn



Jean-Baptiste Franjeulle
Project manager, Capital Games



Félix Rimbeau
Project manager, Capital Games

There's a conspicuous absence of a boardroom table – or indeed boardroom – at today's group discussion. Instead, the modest coffee table and sofa arrangement that our hosts at DONTNOD tell us was hastily assembled earlier in the day makes for a pleasantly understated (and comfortable) change of scene. Here to discuss living and working in Paris, what constitutes a French game and why *World Of Warcraft* might actually be one, are DONTNOD CEO **Oskar Guilbert**; Wizarbox COO **Cyril Labordrie**; SpawnApps CEO **Alex Macris**; **Roman Vincent**, CEO of Kylotonn; and from Capital Games, project managers **Jean-Baptiste Franjeulle** and **Félix Rimbeau**.

What's good about living and working in Paris?

Roman Vincent It's one of the best-known cities in the world – everyone knows the Eiffel Tower and everybody dreams about coming to Paris one day to see the Louvre and all the beautiful monuments.

Cyril Labordrie The city is beautiful, there's great nightlife here, and a lot of museums and theatres.

Oskar Guilbert From a practical standpoint, Paris is hugely accessible by plane and train. There is Paris, and then there's the rest of France, so it's very difficult to have a company in Nice or Lyon – the best place to be really is here.

RV And the transport system *within* Paris is also very good.

Alex Macris First you decide to live in Paris, then you decide to work in Paris, not the other way around. There are other places you discover because you want to work there – for example, the Bay Area in California. You go there for work, then you discover the country and the city and that you might like to live there.

RV But also all the main companies are based in Paris. People working for us came from places like Nice to work here because of that – most of the people working at Kylotonn are not Parisian. If you want to make videogames, you have two choices in France: Lyon and Paris.

Jean-Baptiste We've got 70 per cent of the French videogame industry here in the Paris region. And that's one of the main reasons we decided to talk a little about Capital Games at events like Game Connection Europe, which was originally based in Lyon. It's now moving to Paris because it's more convenient for everybody in France, Europe and all over the globe.

OG Yeah – it helps when we try to work with some famous American artist or UK game designers. Our technical director, who's originally French, was based in the UK before we hired him. The fact that we are in Paris was one of the big motivations for him to work with us.

With so much of the industry based here, what are the relationships like between studios?

AM It's quite an old industry here in France. A lot of studios have been around for a long time, so we have all worked together at some point – for example, I started 17 years ago in the industry and my boss was this guy [points to our photographer, Emmanuel Forsans, who as well as having held positions at Infogrames and Cryo, is president of the French Agency for Video Games].

CL It's really nice – we're able to have tight relationships with other studios for a change and to share our experiences.

OG But on the other hand, it's also good to have Capital Games more active now than before. Usually, just to be honest, we tend to meet in Cologne or San Francisco and it's not so often that we actually meet in Paris [laughter]. Maybe I'm not attending all the events, and maybe it's my fault, but I think it's not so usual that we have meetings together – maybe we should have more. It's good to have Capital Games to push this.

JBF This is a kind of traditional joke in the French industry, I guess. That people always say that they are meeting each other at big events like E3 or Gamescom, but never in Paris. Despite such close relationships, studios are meeting on the other side of the planet, so it's important that we gather locally. I'm pleased to hear that the members of the association are saying that that's useful.

CL Quite often companies work together on common projects. Generally this kind of collaboration is on a technical project, with help from the government, and by now I think most of us have worked with another studio through such partnerships. For example, Wizarbox and SpawnApps have already worked on a government funded project together. It's interesting because you learn a great deal from how the other company works. It's always different, and there's always something new to discover.

RV And of course for collaborative projects like that, there's no competition between the companies – it's all about working together and trying to create something strong and interesting.

> "You decide to live in Paris, then you decide to work in Paris, not the other way around. There are other places you discover because you want to work there"

Does having the Channel Tunnel on your doorstep promote natural links with UK studios?

OG Well, we are doing all our motion capture in London, and there's also the fact that if we want English-speaking actors, the closest ones are in London! [Laughs.] We also work with a company called Side which is working on all the dialogue for us. So, yes, we are collaborating more with UK contractors. Of course, there are many publishers in the UK too, so it's easier for us to visit them.

RV Hiring or working with, for example, UK artists is easy today, but I'm afraid it's more due to the financial crisis than to the Channel Tunnel!

OG The good thing with the UK is that there is very little time difference, whereas working with the US requires people to stay up at night which isn't very good for your family life!

Games like Infogrames' *Alone In The Dark*, Delphine's *Another World* and Ubisoft's *Beyond Good & Evil*, though wildly different, all have that intangible 'French touch'. By addressing the needs of a global market, are you in danger of losing that distinctive personality?

OG The French touch is a double-edged sword for us today. On the one hand we have this reputation for originality and doing games that are a little bit different to the others – and perhaps that can make them a little more appealing to certain people. But on the other hand we are perhaps also guilty of sometimes focusing too much on being arty; too much design and not enough gameplay. I think it can be a little bit dangerous to underline that French touch too much. We have to have good products and good games along with our personality. You can have some iconic inspiration from Paris, like the setting for *Adrift*, but our audience is global.

CL From my point of view, I think it is a good thing that we're shaking off that French touch. I was living in Canada in 1999 and before leaving for the country, everybody in France was talking about the French touch. But when I was living in North America, nobody was talking about it – nobody cared about that. I'm quite happy to see that companies like DONTNOD and Wizarbox are making games that will be successful everywhere in the world. At the beginning of the

industry there wasn't a global market – Japanese players made games for Japanese players and French people made games for French players. We only concentrated on ourselves at that time.
AM Something strange happened ten years ago in France. I don't know exactly why, but between PlayStation and PlayStation 2 we lost the chance to have big, strong companies. In France today there are maybe five or six big studios, and the French touch is probably one of the reasons why we were not able to appeal internationally and grow more. But at the same time the industry transitioned to become a global market, it also became a mass market, and to address the mass market, you don't do it with the French touch.
RV In France, a 100-person studio is a very big company. Quantic Dream is one. In the UK, I'm pretty sure that there more than ten independent companies up to that number of staff, from Rebellion to Codemasters. In France, at that scale, there is only really Ubisoft. And if you are based in a small country with a smaller domestic market, you'll naturally target the planet. But with a mid-size market like the one in France, you might be tempted to first go for the local market, then looking wider. But if you do it that way, you have to change the whole game because you can't conquer the world with a French game.
Félix Rimbeau A member of Capital Games told me he was talking to a manager of a supermarket and was telling him, "I know you want to sell *Call Of Duty* and *Battlefield* on your shelves, but our game is a local game – we're making it two kilometres away from you". When the manager realised it was French, he put it on the shelves and it sold well. So I think the point is that some games need to focus on the French market sometimes.
JBF But that's not easy with bigger productions. You've got to be mainstream, and you've got to be global. Even if *Adrift* is based in Paris, it's appealing for everybody without necessarily including the big French touch. It could be made anywhere else, but it's done here. Social, mobile games can be more specific to territories, but for big productions I don't think it's possible any more.

What is the domestic market like in France?
OG I think it's pretty similar to the domestic markets in the rest of Europe. There are some small specialisations, but *Modern Warfare* is number one in France as it is in the UK.
RV We're working on a pétanque game on PS3 – this is something very specialised! [Laughter.] It will only be for French-speaking territories, but it's very popular in those territories so the publisher says, "OK!" It's a small budget compared to *RAW*.
JBF And another big thing for the French market is that I think we are number one or two in the world in terms of the number of social game players.
CL At the beginning of the interview we were saying that Paris is a very exciting city, but everybody's actually on Facebook! [Laughter.]
JBF But we have many very successful Parisian companies, and members of Capital Games, that are doing that kind of game. You need to have every market covered.
RV At Kylotonn we are not able to work on such titles, but we are starting to finance a social game made by another company. There's a big difference between making a console game and making a social game – it's two different worlds.
OG Absolutely. And personally, I have invested in a social gaming company as well. We feel there is a place for both triple-A titles and social games as well. In the future I think we all want the big games we can play at home, and then other games that I hope my employees play on the bus – not at work! [Laughter.]
JBF For a consumer there is no contradiction between playing games on the bus – or on a lunch break – and playing them at home. A small puzzle game on your iPhone, then bigger games on a console – they're all games, and I think it will be more and more like that in the future.
RV But in terms of development, I think that creating each type of game is a very different job, and that the people who are able to make a console game are not necessarily the same people that can produce a good social game on Facebook. I think most of the French companies involved in social games came from the Web industry and not the videogame industry.
CL The technology is totally different. Last year we were thinking about going to Facebook when we saw how many people were playing games there, but we felt that it was more like managing an account, and creating gameplay that makes you 'spend money to go faster'.
JBF One of the main issues is also the metrics to monitor what the players are doing. And this is another thing that is very new for traditional game developers. Some of the French companies that are adding it into their games are learning how to do that, and they've started to be very successful – especially in Europe. Capital Games helps them with R&D in order to build the metrics companies like Zynga have been so incredibly successful at.

"We're too modest. We should learn from American developers and say, 'Oh, this game is fantastic, it's one of the best products. Look at it, it's awesome!'"



AM There will be space for social games and the more traditional games, but I think both will progress and change. And traditional games will take some of the technology or ideas from Web and social games, and the opposite will also happen – an exchange of ideas. For example, at Ubisoft today, with their technology, even for triple-A games, they're able to get feedback on the user experience. Even if it doesn't change the game it's attached to very much, they can learn from it for the next one. Just for things like learning how many users have finished the game – most developers still don't know things like this.
JBF Just look at what Valve did with *Team Fortress 2* – they constantly bring new ways to adapt their games through Steam again and again, sometimes with a turnaround of 48 hours. It was a kind of traditional, core, triple-A game, then it became free-to-play.

AM Sometimes it's a purely technical issue, and once that issue is unlocked it really enables new ways to develop. The fact that you can now push updates of your game on console, or through Steam or the Web, makes games closer to a soap on TV than the movies – episode by episode you can adapt your game to the audience.
JBF The money's there too; you can adjust to what players want and need in terms of virtual items.

Developers here seem to be distinctly modest about their achievements – why do think this is?
RV I'm not sure if you've discussed this with Quantic Dream… [Laughter.] But we've made mistakes, that's probably why.
CL Things will change when we take over the world… [Laughter.]
OG This is also a French touch – we *are* too modest! We are not pushing our products enough and we are not proud or confident enough. It's our way of doing things – it's a very French way of doing things. But we should learn from American developers and say, "Oh, this game is fantastic, it's one of the best products. Look at it, it's awesome!"
AM That modesty has perhaps replaced the old French touch. French companies were in the top three publishers in the world – companies like Infogrames, Vivendi and Ubisoft were huge, and since then things have declined a bit. But we are coming back. And anyway, the main stockholder in Activision is Vivendi, so you can also consider Activision as a French company!
FR Yep, *World Of Warcraft* is French. [Laughter.]
AM Perhaps we're not as modest as you thought!

Is France's government particularly supportive of the game industry here?
OG We get a lot of support, but it's never enough! It's also very complicated. For example, if you go to Canada, you probably get slightly more governmental support as a developer than you do in France, but the key thing is that is can all be accessed through only one contact. In France, there must be 50 contacts!
RV You have to dedicate someone full-time to work on what you can do and who can help you for each and every project. So as you can imagine, this can be very difficult to manage.
CL I agree. When we started SpawnApps, we had to hire someone just to work on the grants. It's much more complicated than it is in Canada, but the amounts are not really much smaller. We did a comparison because the Canadians come to see us all the time and try to sell us their country, and



the total amount you can have in terms of grants in Canada is a little better, but not by very much.
OG As I said, it could always be better, but as we're still here we clearly haven't found any better options! [Laughs.]
JBF We are working closely with public, national and local authorities on this area at Capital Games. Yes, it can always be better, and of course while we work with national bodies, we're not a national organisation; we're focused very much on Paris and the Paris region. But we're dedicated to trying to do more and get more money for studios, and we've seen some results from that effort, but things like this inevitably take time. In the context of the global economy, it's tougher than ever. But even so, right now I think the state and the local authorities understand that it's very important to support the videogame industry here for all the benefits that it can provide: the culture they bring to the country through international recruitment, the technological progress that the industry pushes, and of course the boost to the economy through sales and new business models.
OG This support is key to our companies today, and in order for it to be as effective as possible, it has to be simplified. It's key to keep the jobs and companies here and offer support for investors and people who believe in the industry.

You mentioned international hiring earlier, but how about local recruitment – does France's education system create enough high-quality graduates for you?
RV In my opinion you can easily recruit enough people in terms of numbers, because there are a lot of different schools teaching videogame-related courses now. But I think French studios really need to recruit outside of the country, because this is not a local market. If we want to make games that can be sold in the US or UK, you need to have someone from those countries to explain what players in those markets enjoy and expect from their games. This is something very international and if you only recruit French people, I'm not sure you'll be able to make something interesting for Japan, the US, UK, etc. It's really a matter of culture.
OG That's very important, and I totally agree with you. We want to sell games worldwide, so our creative director spends a lot of time in the US, and our art director, Aleksi Briclot, just released one of the best-selling graphic novels in the US [Spawn] through Marvel and is the main artist for the card game Magic: The Gathering. One of the reasons we are based in Paris was that this guy said, "If you do the game in Paris I'll work with you, but if you go somewhere else, no way!" [Laughter.]

But do you maintain close ties with French universities in order to help foster local talent at the same time?
CL Yeah, we all have official or unofficial partnerships with the universities that specialise in games.
JBF There are more and more schools opening every year as games spread. Some of them in Paris and others in the north of France – like Enjmin, which is very internationally known.
CL But some of the very famous engineering schools are not interested in videogames at all. Sometimes we try to get in touch with them, and they even occasionally get in touch with us, but communication is difficult. I can talk about this because I am a graduate from one of those schools and when I started working in the game industry, my classmates asked me, "What are you doing? Is that a job?"
RV If you want to have fun, you make videogames, if you want to make cash, you have to do something else. That's the attitude.
CL Even if you're making millions, videogames are still seen as simply frivolous or for children.
RV But I think that's starting to change now. ■

DONTNOD Entertainment

A studio founded by industry veterans that's taking the Parisian fight worldwide

DONTNOD
ENTERTAINMENT

Founded 2008
Location Paris
Employees 70+
Key staff Jean-Maxime Moris (creative director), Oskar Guilbert (studio director), Hervé Bonin (production director), Aleksi Briclot (co-art director)
URL www.dont-nod.com
Current project
Adrift



DONTNOD isn't yet a name familiar to most of us, but that may change next year when its debut game *Adrift* launches. For now, though, the studio is content to focus all of its energy into putting the finishing touches to its near-future brawler rather than building its prominence in the industry. A by-product of this strategy, however, is the air of charismatic mystery that now surrounds the French studio – a studio that modestly dismisses talk of 'triple-A' games while at the same time nonchalantly mentioning that its ambitions are nothing less than to set a new high water mark for the genre.

And even if the studio doesn't yet have form, its co-founders certainly do: studio director Oskar Guilbert contributed to the success of Criterion's RenderWare and oversaw the production of several high-profile games for Ubisoft; creative director Jean-Maxime Moris has worked with some of the biggest publishers in the world, meeting Guilbert during a stint at Ubisoft; production director Hervé Bonin was programmer and lead game designer at the now defunct Cryo Networks; art director Aleksi Briclot is a renowned illustrator in his own right, working on projects as diverse as Magic: The Gathering, *Splinter Cell* and Marvel Comics; and finally narrative director Alain Damasio is an award-winning contemporary science-fiction writer.

If nothing else, it's an eye-catching core line-up that, with plenty of help from the talented team which has built up around it over the past three years, has every chance of delivering on its ambitious promises. So, after several games of *Street Fighter IV* (at our hosts' insistence), we talk to Guilbert, Moris and Bonin about making waves in Paris, and finally being in sight of land.



The city of romance takes on a menacing air in Aleksi Briclot's art, even with landmarks like the Eiffel Tower to cut through the oppressive atmosphere







***Adrift*'s combination of Paris' classical architecture with the striking lines of its newer, metallic constructs calls to mind *Half-Life 2*'s City 17**



STUDIO INSIGHT
Jean-Maxime Moris
Creative director
Oskar Guilbert
Studio director
Hervé Bonin
Production director







***Adrift* seems pretty ambitious for a debut project.**
Jean-Maxime Moris The triple-A label is something for others to put on the game. It's not something that we claim – that's not something we want to do. But what we do want is to make the best possible near-future action adventure game for the PS3 and the 360 – that's the ambition. It may sound like a somewhat dumb decision to make at a time when Facebook games and apps are exploding, but this is the game we wanted to do, and that's it.

How have you managed the logistics?
Hervé Bonin We did all the pre-production with Sony, and we have benefitted from that network to create our own best practices. So we have best practices that we can apply from different studios and publishers just to be sure that our production is rock solid.
Oskar Guilbert And we decided to hire really experienced people at the beginning to have the core of the company extremely solid. That was one of the really important decisions we made at the beginning. The second important decision was to use Unreal technology, not develop our own. It's a huge risk to create a new company, find the form for this company and create a new IP, so we wanted really to limit that risk by using Unreal. It was very easy to have playable builds relatively early in the production process – that was important.

Were you worried that using such a popular engine risked making *Adrift* look too similar to other games?
JMM Yeah, we were very aware that people tend to recognise Unreal games easily, but technology is what you make it. So we added much more colour and contrast to it and I really think that it's going to be harder to spot than some titles where you can go, "Oh, this was made with Unreal" immediately. There's nothing in Unreal that says everything has to be grey – you can have colour too! [Laughs.]
HB We also chose Unreal because it isn't easy to find people who won't use it!

Paris is rarely used as a game setting – *Broken Sword* and *Saboteur* spring to mind, but not much else. Despite wanting to avoid the 'French touch', are you still hoping to put a Gallic stamp on *Adrift*?
JMM No. It's a key motivation for us to really appear as an international developer on the scene and not just a French studio. And *everybody* knows the Eiffel Tower; it's one of the iconic elements that we can use as an anchoring point in a sci-fi game that will be recognised just as easily by someone from the US as somebody from France. It could have been set in Asia, it could have been in the US, but in the end we decided to go for Paris because that's where we live, so the documentation is right in the streets and we just have to go out and take pictures and the reference material is all there. We have very strong links to the city – we love it, and we hate it as well. With Paris we can say: "Yes, this is sci-fi; you may be scared at first because you like realistic shooters, but it's OK, you know this town". [Laughs.] This is how we'll draw the player in. And then we introduce all the crazy stuff. ■





The studio is littered with sci-fi literature and imagery (and the biggest pile of empty granola biscuit boxes we've ever seen)

ADRiFT

WORKING TITLE FALL 2012



Genre : **3rd Person Action / Adventure** Platforms : **PS3 / Xbox 360**

Neo-Paris 2084

Augmented reality and **memory manipulation** have taken control of peoples' lives.

You can now **digitize**, buy, sell or trade your own personal memories.
The last remainders of intimacy have been swept away, in what appears to be a simple extension of the development of social networks and geolocation at the beginning of the **21st century**.

The "**surveillance society**" has been accepted by the citizens themselves, in exchange for a few technological benefits. It is a reality that no one even thinks of challenging anymore.

This memory-based economy gives an immense yet uncontrollable **power** to a handful of people…

BulkyPix

A fast-growing publisher and developer using Darwinian logic to accelerate growth



Founded 2008
Location Paris
Employees 27
Key staff Vincent Dondaine (founder and COO)
URL www.bulkypix.com
Selected softography *Hysteria Project, Saving Private Sheep, Another World: 20th Anniversary Edition*
Current projects *My Perfect Man, Jazz*





***Another World: 20th Anniversary Edition*, an updated version of the classic, allows easy gestural switching between the original and HD graphics**



STUDIO INSIGHT
Vincent Dondaine
Founder and COO

Formed from the ashes of Vivendi Mobile, after Vivendi's acquisition of Activision saw the division scrapped, BulkyPix is a team of mobile experts focusing its talent on producing, and now publishing, games for iOS. We sit down with founder and COO **Vincent Dondaine** to discuss the move into publishing and why he has Gameloft in his sights.

Why did you decide to go into publishing on top of your dev activities?
Our success with iOS games has allowed us to become a publisher. Many of our friends said they'd tried to release a game on iOS but failed, and publishers normally take a lot of money from indie developers. We decided to have a very different model. The average amount our competitors are taking is between 35 and 45 per cent of the revenues which for us is very expensive, and it's not fair; when you've just finished a game, you have to give 30 per cent to Apple, plus another 40 per cent to the publisher. It's just not possible. So we decided to take only 15 per cent of the revenue, because it's really a win-win deal: when they grow, we grow – it's mutual. Right now we are working with 35 studios around the world, publishing games for them and establishing long-term partnerships.

We're now also moving towards another kind of model, as when we finished working with some studios, we were very happy with them so decided to do co-productions. This way, we are creating IP together, sharing the ownership, sharing the risk.

Are XBLA and PSN on the cards?
From my point of view, this model is only feasible on smartphones and digital platforms. It's really more complicated to have this kind of model on consoles as we're talking about millions of euros. But with mobile projects we're talking about thousands of euros. XBLA and PSN aren't too big, but it's something we are considering for the future, step by step. We are growing new IPs on smartphones, and when they are strong enough, we try to find partners on other platforms to release them on – for example, PSP Minis. But when we're big enough, we'll try to do it on our own.

With 40 games per year, how do you balance publishing and development?
We have six development teams working on different games, and a marketing team of nine. When you're talking about publishing, we have to build relationships with the press, with Apple, with the phone carriers, etc. We were used to doing these things from our time working for Vivendi Games Mobile, and as producers we were also used to handling five to ten projects at the same time! So it's a habit, and it's a really fun way to work compared to Gameloft with 7,000 staff.

Gameloft is hugely prolific, though…
Obviously we don't turn around the same kind of money, but we're growing fast. At the moment we're able to release between 30 and 50 games per year and develop between four and six games internally. And we are hoping to do between 12 and 24 co-productions next year. But regarding publishing, we are receiving between five and 15 game submissions per day, but we only validate two or three games at the end of each month. But from a marketing tricks point of view, we are evolving very fast because we are releasing ten times the games most studios are used to releasing in a year. We are learning very quickly what we need to do, and what we need to avoid. ■



The Pirate King



Another World 20th Anniversary



Globulos Mania





JAZZ: Trump's Journey



My Brute



RPM





Focus Home Interactive

With 50 territories to cover, staff at this young publisher know all about focus



Founded 1996
Location Pantin
Employees 30
Key staff Cédric Lagarrigue (CEO)
URL www.focus-home.com
Selected softography *TrackMania, Blood Bowl, Divinity II – The Dragon Knight Saga, Pro Cycling Manager*
Current projects *A Game Of Thrones – Genesis, Cities XL 2012, Wargame – European Escalation, The Testament Of Sherlock Holmes, Of Orcs And Men, Confrontation*





With no *Sim City* of note on the horizon, Focus currently has the conurbation building genre to itself with the internally developed *CitiesXL 2012*

STUDIO INSIGHT
Thomas Barrau
International product manager



Focus Home Interactive is a prolific independent French publisher based just outside of Paris with a portfolio that includes games such as *Blood Bowl*, *TrackMania* and Cyanide's upcoming *A Game Of Thrones: Genesis*. International product manager **Thomas Barrau** takes us through the ethos behind this growing, ambitious company.

What do you look for when considering games to publish?
At an international level, we have to find games with big IPs or licences, or with a very strong concept. We always want to try to find original games or ones which are supported by a strong community. But even if there is no community, we have the experience to build one thanks to games like *TrackMania*, which now has tens of millions of users. And with *Blood Bowl*, we are proud to be behind the second world cup, with more than 2,000 participants. We like the community, and we try to make them appreciate our games, too!

Do you buy concepts or finished titles?
We do both. We visit a lot of developers at places like E3 and Gamescom, sneaking around to see if there are any good new concepts. We also receive a lot of concepts by email from people who know our strong points – we have a reputation for being good in adventure, strategy and niche games. We like to go where other publishers don't like to go! And the developers we have worked with like working with us, so they offer us their new concepts as well.

With just 30 in-house staff, how do you go about managing a global business?
We have the experience to release games on any platform, and by having everything based here – we handle testing and localisation, for example – we have very good reactivity. I know people at other publishers who need approval for *everything*, which really slows things down. Also, we have good partners abroad – when you have strong distributors they are able to have a good impact on the sales. So, for example, for *Tour De France* on consoles and PC, we were first on the top of the charts during July and August in five territories.

Do you have plans to expand?
We're growing. And it's easier for us to do our job when we're working with talented developers. The French market accounts for 20 per cent of our turnover right now, but the ideal is that it becomes five to eight per cent. But as retail grows, we also want to see our online business expand. I think Focus was the first to launch in the digital market in France, and the first to believe invest in it. Now, for all the titles we have, we also have a digital shop for it. And we have a good relationship with Apple, too.

What about subsidiaries abroad?
If we opened subsidiaries abroad we would need more people; people who knew the local market. Our distributors know the markets, press and retailers – they already have those contacts. This is perfect for us – we have to deal with 50 territories, and local partners is, for us, the perfect solution.

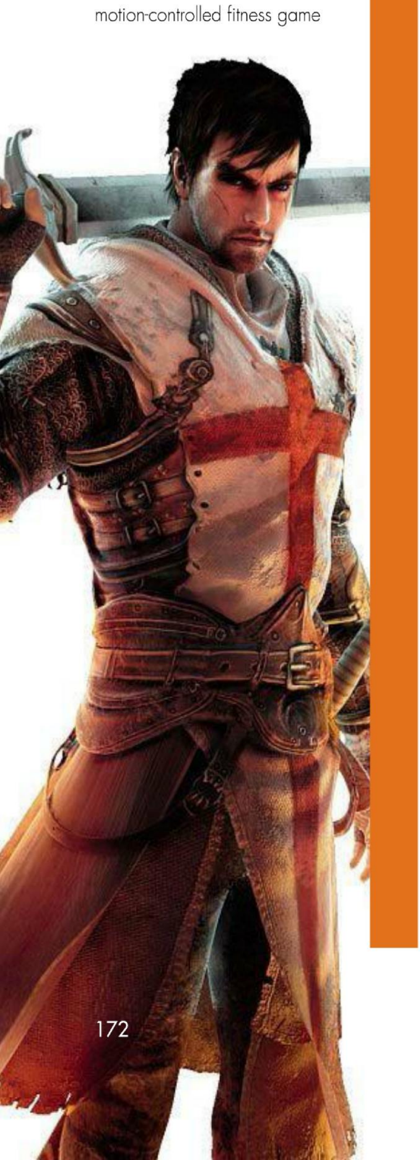
How do you keep such a familial atmosphere despite the scale of the company's activities?
Well, that's because we have so much work to do here and only a few people to do it, so when we're in till midnight in order to finish a project, it builds a really strong team! [Laughs.] ■

Kylotonn Games

This developer is happy to co-operate in order to punch above its weight



Founded 2002
Location Paris
Employees 40+
Key staff Roman Vincent (CEO and co-founder), Yann Tambellini (creative director and co-founder)
URL www.kylotonngames.com
Selected softography *The Cursed Crusade, My Body Coach 2, Hidden Path Of Faery*
Current projects An unannounced shooter and a motion-controlled fitness game





The possessed protagonist of *The Cursed Crusade* is, as the title suggests, cursed, giving him the ability to shift from human to demon form



STUDIO INSIGHT
Roman Vincent
CEO
Yann Tambellini
Creative director





Starting out making action games for PC, Kylotonn has since shifted its focus to console, with games like *Speedball 2 Tournament* and hack-and-slasher *The Cursed Crusade*. But as well as development, Kylotonn has also worked with other French studios to build a powerful crossplatform game engine. We join CEO **Roman Vincent** and creative director **Yann Tambellini** to discuss the benefits of joining forces.

How do you split internal resources between games and technology?

RV It's really a mix. We have a lot of different specialists, and most of the team work on the production pipelines for the tools and the game too. Everyone needs to be able to work on different projects.

YT The technology needs to serve the game. We don't care if it uses 20 per cent or 100 per cent of the power of the PS3, we just need to have the tools and technology required to make the game. We don't need to make the best technology worldwide, or develop something that we will never use. And we don't want to create technology that already exists, so of course we'll work with middleware too.

VR KT Engine was our previous engine, and today it's really only used on Wii titles and some PC titles. The new technology is called Play All, which is really aimed at console platforms, including PC. It's two ways to address different types of title.

YT It's crossplatform, not just multiplatform. We address many platforms with the same source code. So while the KT engine lets us target PC, iPhone, Wii and casual platforms, it's the same [code] on console. That's why we released *The Cursed Crusade* on three platforms simultaneously.

Play All was a shared effort between three studios. What inspired that move?

YT We wanted an engine with which it was possible for any studio to build any type of game. We worked with Wizarbox and Darkworks Studio, and so all the studios involved were working on different types of game. That allowed us to build something really flexible.

RV We worked for more than two years all together in the same place, with engineers from all three studios. We've all decided to develop it for our individual needs, but the core technology is the same. And, if we want, we can merge our progress with the other studios'.

Is it advantageous to have three studios' ideas and skills combined?

RV Absolutely. And the main one was that we were not able to do it all ourselves. At the moment, we really want to keep our independence, and to do that we really need to share and work with others for something big like a production pipeline for consoles. And, of course, it's been interesting to share different ways to work and different visions of what we need to do to build a strong game engine.

YT Game studios tend to stay in one position, and we share with other studios only at big game events. We need other studios when we're very far away from France. There's another studio in this building, just the second floor, but at the beginning we spoke with them more often for when we were in San Francisco for GDC, or at Gamescom! So working on a collaborative project, finally forced us and gave us the ability to speak together. ■

THE CURSED CRUSADE

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18
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Wizarbox

A studio that's serious about being hardcore

Founded 2003
Location Sevres, Paris
Employees 40
Key staff Fabien Bihour (CEO), Cyril Labordrie (COO), David Vesa Cohen (CTO), François Francken (project manager)
URL www.wizarbox.com
Selected softography *So Blonde, Gray Matter, Imagine Doctor, Venetica* (360/PS3 port)
Current projects *RAW, Captain Morgane And The Golden Turtle*





Captain Morgane And The Golden Turtle **follows a female pirate as she travels the Caribbean to find a fabulous treasure and her missing uncle**





STUDIO INSIGHT
Julien Millet
Project manager

When we visit Wizarbox, one end of the studio plays host to a development team working feverishly on the now-released hack-and-slasher *RAW*, while at the other a group of besuited businessmen from public transport provider RATP test a bus-driving simulator that's been built to train their company's staff. It's an amusing contrast, but also the perfect illustration of the small studio's broad reach across fun and serious games, development and technology. We sit down with project manager **Julien Millet** to discuss the challenge of keeping all those plates spinning.

Wizarbox works on a diverse range of games – how do you approach that challenge from a design point of view?
When you're a good game designer you're able to work on any type of game. It's all about constraints and knowing who you are making the game for. For instance, we worked on *Imagine Family Doctor*. I'm a hardcore gamer – because when you're a game designer you love games – so when we were faced with something like *Imagine Family Doctor*, it was like, "Oh". But that's the kind of projects where you learn. It was really hard because it seemed to be really restricted. And we worked with Ubisoft and they told us that little girls love to do things again and again and again. At first we weren't convinced it wasn't boring, but it's really challenging to imagine what a little girl of seven to nine years old would think! It was like a world war, in the trenches! [Laughs.]

You build your own in-house technology – why not use thirdparty tools?
Using middleware is sometimes efficient, but it can cause big problems, because you are depending on someone else just for additional features. If you get the chance to have your own engine, you're focused on the type of title you do. So all your production pipeline, all your tools are geared to the type of game you make. You lose versatility, for sure, because if we want to use it again for different types of game, it is less efficient, but for specific types of game we have something a lot more focused.

Given the different types of projects you work on, how far ahead do you have to think in terms of game engine capabilities?
I'd say our engine is built upon the needs of the production; if you keep going back and forth between the engine and the gameplay, you can optimise it to have a hack-and-slash engine. But if we do an FPS, we will evaluate all appropriate solutions to see which is the most efficient. I mean, we don't build middleware to have something efficient in all types of games; we do something efficient for the type of game. I think we'll be on hack-and-slash for some time because we've got the tools and the engine, and it's not suitable to do a car racing game.

And how about when it comes to making games for other companies?
Yeah, we're a service provider, not only a game maker. So while we're having our own game on this engine, it's a hack-and-slash engine. If we have other people asking us to do a game and we see that this technology doesn't fit, we select another one. You need the right tool for the job. We know that we don't have the flexibility of something like Unity. Middleware isn't our activity. The Unity people are doing an amazing product and if you want an all-purpose engine, go to them for that solution. ■


WIZARBOX
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Looking for a talented and experienced
developer delivering quality on time?
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Meet us at the
Game Connection
Paris 6-8th
december 2011

SpawnApps

The technology company that wants to make playing games more like YouTube



Founded 2010
Location Paris
Employees 5
Key staff Alex Macris, Benoit Hozjan and Olivier Nemoz (co-founders)
URL www.spawnapps.com



SpawnApps' tech is capable of delivering *Crysis 2* in a browser



What's the thinking behind the way SpawnApps' browser gaming technology works?
The idea was: 'How can we bring the native desktop applications in-browser to offer the same accessibility than any Web app or Flash game?' We had two main goals – the first was that we wanted to be plugin-less. There are solutions out there where you first have to install a navigator plugin, and unless you have a plugin that is really widespread, you end up with an unchanged user experience. The other goal was to avoid any porting of the native app to bring it in-browser. So we wanted companies to do that without changing the source, unlike SDK-based solutions where the codebase has to be modified to make the app Web-enabled.

How does the 'Spawner' work?
If you have an app that is one, two or three gigs to download before you can experience it, it's really not accessible as it isn't fast enough. So what we're able to do is transfer a small piece of the application, start it up and then stream the remaining assets on demand.

As a solution, how does it compare to cloud-powered gaming?
We try to provide a user experience as close to a game cloud system as possible. But the difference is that with the cloud, a distant server executes the application and streams the video. We are executing the application on the end-user PC. There are pros and cons compared to cloud gaming, but our technology is definitely different.

Cloud gaming providers have the problem of creating the infrastructure for serving games. You need to be close to them and to have a good bandwidth to get a decent user experience. We don't have these issues. With SpawnApps, you have the exact same experience as if you had installed it the 'old' way [laughs].

Your technology relies on the user's PC for processing – how do you avoid netbook users being disappointed?
Yeah [laughs], obviously we can't make *Crysis 2* run on a netbook. At the moment we don't think this is the problem. The point is to improve accessibility. For example, we can get the full specification of the end-user PC, so we should be able to tell the user whether their system is powerful enough. But what's interesting is that developers will at last have a feedback channel – Web analytics – for all new users. And they can say, "OK, what's the average configuration on which my game or demo has been played?" For example, if you have *The Sims* and you want to know how many users are playing girls and how many are playing boys, you can see that. Or just knowing how many players have actually finished your game – this is something most developers simply don't know today if they're just pushing a download. ■

SpawnApps
Spawn your apps in-browser
www.spawnapps.com

Capital Games

The non-profit association helping to put Paris' talent on the map



Founded 2003
Location Paris
Employees 4
Key staff Patrick Pligersdorffer (president), Lisa Hesse-Dréville (CEO), Jean-Baptiste Franjeulle, Hélène Delay and Félix Rimbeau (project managers)
URL www.capital-games.org



Capital has long-term goals to affect the structure of the industry

STUDIO INSIGHT
Jean-Baptiste Franjeulle
Project manager



What is Capital Games' role in the Paris game industry?
Capital Games is a non-profit association, a business cluster that gathers together 60 companies as of 2011. All of them are small and medium enterprises based in the Paris and Paris region. We work with companies on four major axes: human resources, export, financing development and R&D. Those are the main challenges for studios, publishers and tech companies.

Why is there a need for Capital Games?
Entrepreneurs wanted to gather their needs and resources in order to be stronger. They understood that even though they were competitors sometimes, they still had to stick together to face the big challenges of the game industries and the very tough worldwide market. When you're small and need to develop your company, you can't do basic things like send your coders for training – things that are easy for a big company like Ubisoft. We help a group of companies to share the costs of important aspects like training, and negotiate attractive prices with all kinds of partners in many areas of the business. We put in place several projects a year, and our members are so happy to be able to help their staff progress. And it's vital for creativity and to push talented people even further, so it's very popular and a lot of our resources are dedicated to that. We also help companies to attend the big international events, like E3, Gamescom, GDC, by covering up to one third of the costs of the plane tickets, entrance to the show, booths and hotels, etc.

What's in it for companies offering services at discounted prices?
It's important to remember that Capital Games is a large network, and through that we can guarantee a great deal of awareness for the company's services by communicating with our members. We ask for interested parties, then go back to the company and maybe have five or ten potential customers for them. Then we can put our money, together with some from our members and some of our public authorities partners, on the table and ask, "What's your best deal?"

Is your membership still growing?
Yes, absolutely. We had a totally new team in June 2009 with the arrival of CEO Lisa Hesse-Dréville. When she arrived, she put a lot of energy and time into developing the Capital Games network, our projects and our partnerships with national and local public authorities, and building a team to manage that. Since then the number of members in our network hasn't stopped growing. Since January we've added around one or two companies each month. And companies can see the results of their membership in a very short time – most companies get their annual fee back from the first thing we work with them on. Capital Games is a real developer community for Paris and the Paris region. ■


#236
December 20



